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& Theodore Sturgeon

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William Shunn

Mountain's Revenge

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contributors

MICHAEL BISHOP's 16 novels include *No Enemy But Time*, winner of the 1982 Nebula Award; *Unicorn Mountain*, winner of the 1988 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award; and *Brittle Innings*, winner of the Locus Award for Best Fantasy Novel of 1994. He has published criticism, a volume of poetry entitled *Time Pieces* (1998), and numerous short story collections, most recently *Blue Kansas Sky* (2000) and *Brighten to Incandescence: 17 Stories* (2003). Also an editor and a teacher, he lives in Pine Mountain, Georgia, with his wife Jeri, an elementary school counselor.

HARLAN ELLISON has written or edited 75 books; more than 1,700 stories, essays, articles, and newspaper columns; two dozen teleplays, and a dozen movies. He has won just about every award for fantasy/sci fi that is given—many, more than once. He created great fantasies for *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*; traveled with The Rolling Stones; marched with Martin Luther King from Selma to Montgomery; once stood off the son of a Mafia kingpin with a Remington XP-100 while wearing nothing but a bath towel; sued Paramount and ABC-TV for plagiarism and won $337,000—and probably is the most contentious person now walking the Earth. But the bottom line, as voiced by *Booklist* last year, is this: "One thing for sure: the man can write."

THEODORA GOSS lives in Boston, Massachusetts, where she is finishing a Ph.D. in English literature. She has published poetry in magazines as different as *The Lyric* and *Dreams of Decadence*. This is her second short story publication. She enjoys teaching obscure Victorian poetry to unsuspecting undergraduates and believes, with the Duchess of Windsor, that you can never have too many books or too many cats. Visit her Web site at *www.theodoragoss.com*.

BRUCE HOLLAND ROGERS lives temporarily in Toronto, Ontario, which is fast becoming his favorite city. Lately, much of his writing has been in the short-short story form, and some samples of these brief fictions can be found at *www.shortshort.com*.

WILLIAM SHUNN was born in Los Angeles and raised in Utah. He sold his first story in 1993 and last year was nominated for the Nebula Award. He served this year as a judge for the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, in the science fiction and fantasy category. His wedding to Laura Chavoen played in heavy rotation on the Travel Channel series "Two for Las Vegas" throughout 2002. He and his wife live in New York City.

MICHAEL SWANWICK has received the Hugo, Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, and World Fantasy Awards for his work. *Stations of the Tide* was honored with the Nebula Award, and "The Very Pulse of the Machine" received the Hugo Award in 1999, as did "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur" in 2000 and "The Dog Said Bow-Wow" in 2002. His stories have appeared in numerous publications and have been translated into over 10 languages. His books include *In the Drift, Vacuum Flowers, Griffin's Egg, Stations of the Tide, The Iron Dragon's Daughter,* and *Jack Faust*. His short fiction has been collected in *Gravity's Angels, A Geography of Unknown Lands, Moon Dogs,* and *Tales of Old Earth*. A collection of short-shorts, *Cigar Box Faust and Other Miniatures,* is scheduled to appear in 2003 from Tachyon Books. Michael lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marianne Porter, and their son, Sean. His latest novel, *Bones of the Earth,* was recently published by AvonEos. He currently has two weekly series of short-short stories on the Web: "Michael Swanwick's Periodic Table of Science Fiction" on Sci Fiction, and "The Sleep of Reason" on The Infinite Matrix. He is also at work on a new novel.

THEODORE STURGEON published his first story, "Ether Breather," in September 1939. His early work was short stories primarily for sci fi magazines such as *Astounding* and *Unknown*, but also for general interest publications such as *Argosy*. A small sample of his stories includes "Derm Fool" (1940), "Bianca's Hands" (1947), "The World Well Lost" (1953), and "The Nail and the Oracle" (1964). His novels include *The Dreaming Jewels* (1950), *The King and Four Queens* (1956), *The Cosmic Rape* (1958), and *Godbody* (1986). He wrote screenplays for *Star Trek* episodes "Shore Leave" (1966) and "Amok Time" (1967), and introduced the Prime Directive in an unproduced script. At the height of his popularity in the 1950s, Sturgeon was the most anthologized living author. His work has influenced the likes of Ray Bradbury, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Harlan Ellison. Theodore Sturgeon passed away on May 8, 1985.

KAREN TRAVISS is a journalist from Hampshire, England. Her short stories have appeared in *Asimov's* and *On Spec*, and the first novel in her *City of Pearl* science fiction trilogy is due to be published by HarperCollins early in 2004.

GENE WOLFE began to write in 1956, shortly after he and his wife Rosemary were married. They needed money for a bed and stove. His first sale was "The Dead Man" to *Sir* in 1965. Since then there have been numerous stories and books, including *The Fifth Head of Cerberus, Peace, The Shadow of the Torturer, The Urth of the New Sun, There Are Doors, Nightside the Long Sun, On Blue Waters, In Green's Jungles,* and *Return to the Whorl*. His short stories have been collected in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories, Endangered Species,* and *Strange Travelers*. His work has been given three World Fantasy Awards, two Nebula Awards, the British Fantasy Award, the British Science Fiction Award, and the Deathrealm Award, among others. Although it has never won a Hugo Award, his work has been nominated eight times. So far.

REALMS OF FANTASY

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DEALER INQUIRES ARE WELCOME!

By Resa Nelson

Underworld creates a new mythology for vampires and werewolves.

A few months ago, the London *Times* ran an article about first-time novelists who are 50 and older. One author talked about the advantages of age in terms of applying life experience to characterization—noting its importance unless one is writing fantasy or science fiction, where characterization "doesn't matter."

It's a common slap in the face to the genre. But poised to prove otherwise are the American filmmakers of *Underworld*, scheduled for release on September 19 by Screen Gems and Lakeshore Entertainment. They landed not only highly respected actor Kate Beckinsale (*Serendipity, Pearl Harbor*), but several of her fellow British stage and television actors to star in a film about vampires fighting werewolves.

Underworld has a classic high concept: Beckinsale plays Selene, a vampire who hunts down and kills werewolves—until she falls in love with one.

Writer and actor Kevin Grevioux (*The Hulk, Men in Black II*) came up with the idea when approached by director Len Wiseman. "Len called me and said, 'What do you think about a werewolf movie?' and I said, 'Not much, really,'" Grevioux recalls. "The reason being that there have only been two werewolf movies to really speak about, and those were *American Werewolf in London* and *The Howling*."

All photos © 2003 Lakeshore Entertainment by Egon Endrenyi

Lucian (Michael Sheen) is at the center of the battle between the vampires and werewolves. INSET: Kate Beckinsale plays Death Dealer Selene.

But they tossed ideas around for a couple of days, and Grevioux took a chance. "I said, 'Now look, I'm going to tell you this and don't laugh, because in a way it sounds kind of silly, but if you think about it, this could be really cool. What if we did a Romeo and Juliet story, but instead of Montagues and Capulets, we used werewolves on one side and vampires on the other?' I remember he got dead silent

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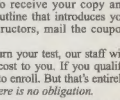

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Selene learned her hatred of Lycans from her father and became a Death Dealer. When she becomes involved with a human she begins to question what she is doing.

and crossed his arms. And I said, 'Just hear me out.' And so I pitched him a movie that would be more like *West Side Story* with the antagonism and the interracial interplay. I created this whole world that took place centuries ago. I said, 'Our premise will be that vampires and werewolves had a symbiotic relationship way back in antiquity.'"

Wiseman and Grevioux invested a year in developing the story and script but ran into problems. Wiseman turned to another friend, screenwriter Danny McBride (TV's *Outer Limits*), who initially was just as reluctant as Grevioux to write a script about werewolves.

"Everyone keeps plugging this as Romeo and Juliet, and Len and I keep running away from that as fast as we can," McBride says. "It was apparently just a selling point with the studios. We were a little bit nervous, because it isn't a *Titanic*-type love story at all. It's more realistic." McBride laughs. "As realistic as you can make vampires and werewolves, anyway."

Underworld is a milieu where, for centuries, vampires who kill werewolves (called Lycans, short for lycanthropes) have been known as Death Dealers. While humans go about their business in what appears to be a normal world, Death Dealers and Lycans wage war.

"The wars went on for so long, and they're so tight-lipped about the past, that people just perform their duties," McBride says. "Some people involved don't even know why they're fighting."

Death Dealers see themselves as necessary, because Lycans are carnivorous. Lycans tear humans apart, while vampires stopped feeding on humans hundreds of years ago. Vampires now choose synthetic plasma. While Lycans are brutal, vampires have turned to high tech: The next step is cloned blood.

"They're hunting down the Lycans because if Lycans tear people up, that will prove that werewolves exist," McBride explains. "The vampire line of thinking is, they can be found out and exposed. That's the practice the Death Dealers started back in the Middle Ages when you had people running around with pitchforks."

Selene has learned to hate Lycans from her father, Viktor, the head vampire. She embraces her role as a Death Dealer, but there's plenty Viktor hasn't told her. Selene doesn't know the root of the hatred between vampires and Lycans, or her father's part in creating it. The truth is, Viktor had another daughter during the Middle Ages who fell in love with Lucian, a Lycan, and became pregnant.

"Viktor feared a mulatto baby—it's really a play on racism and slavery," McBride says. "He was so upset that he created these rules, this covenant, that there could be no mixing of the species, because the vampires are on top. And if there's a mixing of species, you're going to have something more powerful than either side, and the vampires are going to lose their place in the hierarchy. Because he's the one that creates all the rules, he's forced to kill his daughter, have her burned alive in front of Lucian. She was the love of his life. Ever since then, vampires have been out to get Lucian, and Lucian's been out for revenge. But from Selene's point of view, the vampires are in the right, because she doesn't know any of this. It's all secret.

"Then the past repeats itself. She becomes taken with this human, which is bad enough in a vampire's eyes, who later gets bitten by a Lycan. So she has a thing going on with this Lycan, and Viktor is beside himself—it's happening all over again. To Viktor, Selene is his perfect daughter, she was his replacement daughter who hated Lycans as much as he did. So she's basically part of the KKK, so to speak, too. But after spending time with Michael (played by Scott Speedman of TV's *Felicity*), she starts to suspect there's something fishy going on."

The perception of vampires and werewolves as different races came from Greviloux's personal experience. "I first got the idea while I was in an interracial relationship. A lot of times there's that tension about what both sides think about the two of you dating. And then, invariably, discussions come up about, 'What if we have kids?'"

Because Selene is her father's "perfect" daughter, she struggles with the prejudices she's learned from him.

"For our characters, characters who are alive for millennia, it's still fresh in their minds—their hatreds, their prejudices—and it's hard for them to change with the times," McBride says. "It's hard for Selene, too, but she does. She goes from being somebody who's out to kill to wanting to step back and learn why she's doing that.

"We wanted to make Selene a new kind of female character. We knew she was going to be dressed very sexy and look sexy, but we didn't want her shaking her butt, winking at the camera, and having gratuitous nudity scenes and cracking jokes. As far as I know, she's the first kind of female action character that doesn't really do a lot of that."

When the filmmakers were searching for a studio that would back the film, they ran into many obstacles. One problem was the challenge of keeping their vision of Selene. While developing the script, McBride had studied *Blade Runner* and decided to model Selene somewhat on that movie's main character, Deckard. Therefore, the filmmakers weren't impressed by studios that suggested casting a supermodel as Selene. They kept shopping for a studio until they found one that understood their vision.

"But having Kate—she's such a good actor," McBride says. "Her fans are shocked that she's doing a movie like this, but it's brought something extra to it. To have somebody of her caliber step up and want to be in it and breathe life into her character is a phenomenal experience."

And yet, Beckinsale almost didn't read the script, nearly dismissing it at first glance.

"I'd been a big fan of hers since *Cold Comfort Farm*," McBride says. "When she called, I was flabbergasted. Apparently, the script had been sent to her and she said, 'I'm not going to read this.' She'd read all the scripts for that week, and she looked at that one again, and flipped it open. Len is a fabulous artist, and he'd drawn a bunch of pictures, and the pic-

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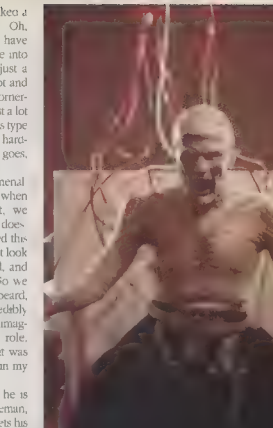
tures he drew of Selene looked a lot like Kate. And she said, 'Oh, my God, this guy must have drawn me to try to suck me into the project,' when it was just a fluke. But she read the script and she loved it. She was the cornerstone for casting, and we cast a lot of British stage actors. For this type of movie, we've got a lot of hard-hitting talent as far as acting goes, which is a little bit odd.

"Michael Sheen is phenomenal. He walked in to play Lucian when we were casting. At first, we looked at him and said, 'He doesn't look right.' We envisioned this guy as 6'4", and he just didn't look the part. And then he read, and we knew he was Lucian. So we put long hair on him and a beard, and he became this incredibly powerful presence. I can't imagine anybody else in that role. When he read the dialog, it was exactly how I had heard it in my head. It was spooky.

"And then Bill Nighy … he is this tall, slender British gentleman, veteran of the stage, never gets his feathers ruffled, always cracking a joke, doesn't do push ups or run around in circles or scream or do anything the American actors tend to do. I really hope that Michael and Bill get some work in the States out of this. They're both just amazing actors."



Viktor (Bill Nighy), the head vampire, leads the hunt for the Lycans to avenge a daughter who had fallen in love with Lucian. Viktor was forced to burn his daughter alive.

Chances are, such amazing actors joined the project thanks to a well-thought out script. Grevioux, McBride, and Wiseman created an interesting mythology for their vampires and werewolves.

Grevioux got the ball rolling by tapping into the expertise he gained from earning degrees in microbiology and genetic engineering, as well as from a former job as a research assistant at the National Institutes of Health. His vision for *Underworld* was to avoid mysticism and focus on a scientific reason for vampires and werewolves to exist.

"I based everything on a form of super-rabies and genetic gene splicing," Grevioux says. "Way back in antiquity, the first group of vampires were bitten by bats, which carried this disease. On the Lycan side, they were bitten by wolves. The disease spread, and it caused a virus. It created both vampires and werewolves.

"If you look at the old Frankenstein/Werewolf movies, the villagers were always after these guys. So if they had a symbiotic relationship, the werewolves would protect the vampires while they slept during the day, and the vampires would watch over the werewolves when they were uncontrollable during the full moon. This relationship led them to cross paths and start fraternizing in love. That created this monster called the hybrid that had all the powers of both races but none of the weaknesses. But that creature threatened to kill them all. So there was an edict and a pact between the two races that none of them would ever co-mingle in that way for fear of creating a hybrid."

This mythology mutated when McBride came on board.

"He made it more of a general plague because his mythology was different from mine," Grevioux says. "I've got to say that Danny is a genius, because Len and I were having problems with certain aspects of the screenplay. He created another mythology that went even deeper than mine. He took the symbiotic relationships I had and made them more antagonistic earlier. He said, 'Why not go full blown and say the Lycans were the vampires' slaves or hell hounds?' He made something really special out of it."

McBride's vision meant staying away from many familiar icons, ranging from Vlad the Impaler to such traditional vampire icons as crosses and no reflections in mirrors. At the same time, he kept some basics. Sunlight destroys vampires, and silver bullets kill werewolves.

One goal was to come up with an original way to transform Lycans into their werewolf shapes.

"Our hero's transformations in the movie take place inside the body," McBride says. "We had never seen that done before. So we decided to dive through Scott's chest and take a look at what's happening to the bones and organs, which I think is a little something that's different, too."

Another goal was to make the existence of vampires and werewolves plausible.

We wanted to come up with something that has a history to it," McBride says. "What we presuppose is that there was an ancient warlord named Alexander Corvinus—that was a big family name in Hungary. We presuppose that a plague came through—not the Black Plague, but a plague, even SARS today, if you looked back, that would be a sort of plague. Everybody dies except for him. He was like the Omega man in his neck of the woods. His body through some genetic mutation, was able to absorb this disease. And then later he had three sons. Two of them inherited this immortality trait and one of them was a regular human. And it's so far back in the past that the vampires and the werewolves look at this as a children's story, one bitten by bat, one by wolf, and one to walk the lonely road of mortality. That's how vampires and werewolves have a common denominator, a common ancestor."

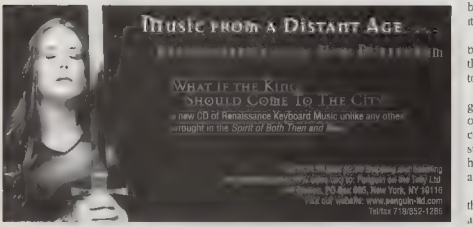
In keeping with the mythology of the Hungarian warlord, *Underworld* was filmed in Budapest.

"Budapest is so gothic looking," McBride says. "Cobblestone streets, gas lamps, the sides of the buildings—the place was virtually untouched during the World War II.

"You could just feel the history seeping out of the walls, the woodwork, the gargoyles, the griffins and angels, all this ornate handcrafting, even the buildings themselves. A lot of the run down places we went, we'd show up on the set, and it looked like David Fincher had been there a week before and completely dressed the set, but it was really just the way the place looked. We shot in one of the oldest tunnel alleys in Europe. We had a big chase scene with Lucian running 50 miles per hour after the car, after Selene. The place just reeks with history, and I think it comes across on the film.

"It's a beautiful city. The movie opens with Kate in a bell tower. The camera creeps up behind her. She's a brave girl. She was tied in with wires for safety purposes, but a lot of people can't climb up on a railing that's 150 feet above the ground.

"Kate says it's her finest movie experience ever. Believe it or not, she's an action genre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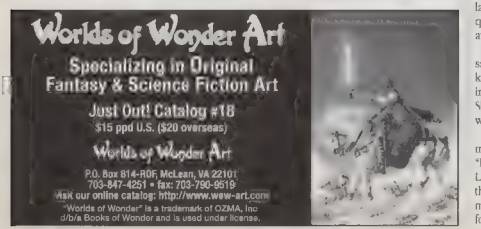
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freak. And she just never gets to do those movies. She says, 'Everybody meets me and thinks I'm going to invite them over for scones.' She's this Victorian Age beauty, but I think she got into putting on the leather jackets and running around and killing werewolves.'

Audiences are already anxious to watch Beckinsale put on her leather jacket and kill werewolves, as McBride found out when the film went before a test audience.

"The power of the Internet never ceases to amaze me," McBride says. "We went down to do a screening for test purposes. Len and I went down to Orange County, and he tweaked the sound and the color and it looked beautiful—it's the first HD, high definition, projection of a test, ever. We were calling the movie *The Covenant* for testing purposes. Somebody got one of these forms, posted it on the Internet, and there were hundreds of people calling the theater, wanting to come down and see it because they knew it was *Underworld*. Apple.com and sony.com got back to us through Screen Gems and said that we got 79,000 hits in two days on the trailer on Apple, and then 225,000 in a couple days on the Sony site, which was more than *Charlie's Angels 2* got, and they'd been pumping a fortune into it. There's definitely an appetite for this kind of film.

I'm a genre nut. I think my favorite vampire movie would have to be *Interview with the Vampire*, because I love Anne Rice. It's stunning—you take something that seems to be used up and old, you put a new twist in it, and people get excited."

Grevioux adds, "We're creating a comic book movie. Not a lot of people understood that. There is no silliness—there doesn't have to be any silliness.

"Truth to tell, as with a lot of the fantasy genre, it appeals to the 14-year-old kid in all of us. It's not meant to be something that's corny or kitschy, but it's not meant to be so super adult that it will go over everyone's head. It's supposed to be pure fun. We have a hit on our hands."

Grevioux isn't the only one seeing a hit in the making. Games, comic books, and novels are poised to coincide with the movie's release. Likewise, the filmmakers see a world large enough to support a sequel and a prequel. As first-time filmmakers, they remain aware of their good fortune.

I have to thank Len, of course," Grevioux says, "for thinking enough of me and my knowledge of sci-fi, and Danny for coming in—he's the one who got the project going. Skip Williamson is the executive producer. He was just as instrumental as any of us."

It's not like I'm pulling the money out of my ATM to make the movie," McBride says. "It's a big risk. I can't thank the people at Lakeshore and Screen Gems enough. I mean, they've given us the opportunity to go and make our dreams come true. I'm never gonna forget that." ❧

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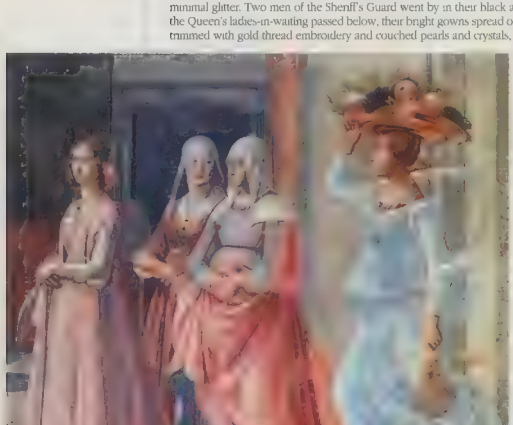
PLAY MORE

By Emma Bull

You can dress for time-travel success on a budget.

One afternoon at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival, I was hanging out with my fellow off-duty musicians in the loft of the Blue Lion Tavern. The loft's walls were more like railings, so it was drafty and damp on rainy days. But on nice ones, it was the perfect spot for people-watching.

Which we were doing. We saw the Mayor's court go past below us, the Mayor in his elegant but restrained doublet and flat cap, the lady and gentlemen merchants in his train also well dressed with minimal glitter. Two men of the Sheriff's Guard went by in their black and red uniforms. Then three of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting passed below, their bright gowns spread over enormous Tudor hoops and trimmed with gold thread embroidery and couched pearls and crystals, frivolous veiling fluttering from their headdresses. Two peasants dragging a cart looked more comfortable than all the rest in their loose muslin smocks and cropped, baggy trews and faded bag caps.



To separate the middle class from the nobility, sumptuary laws were devised during the Renaissance that dictated what each class could wear

Then a group of three more costumed people hove into sight. "Patrons," said one of the musicians at the rail next to me. ("Patrons" is what they call folks who pay to get in the gate at the Minnesota fair, as distinct from the entertainment, cooks, security, and all the rest of the staff.)

It hadn't been that long since I'd been a patron myself. Still, how could anyone tell from three floors up that someone in costume was not a Festival employee? All three wore hooded cloaks. The ladies had long skirts. The gentleman wore a loose black shirt with poet sleeves and tall boots. What was I missing? What gave it away?

"It's the shoes," my musician friend explained.

And darned if he wasn't right. The ladies had trusted that their skirts would hide, respectively, loafers and a pair of black Reeboks. The gentleman probably felt very swashbuckly, but there's no mistaking the heavy soles and heels on a pair of Frye boots.

There were other clues. One of the cloaks was made of some satiny, lightweight stuff that fluttered like a flag and didn't really do a cloak's job. Both the ladies were bare-headed, with not even a circlet of flowers to address the management rule that Participants Shall Wear Headgear. But those could have been oversight or stubbornness. It was the shoes that said, "We only do this a couple of days a year."

Because footgear is the hardest piece of costume to fake and often the most expensive to buy, it can distinguish the regulars from the first-timers in any historical setting. There's many a cowboy or Regency lady who looks right . . . almost down to the ground.

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So what? Who cares how convincing your outfit is, or even if you're in costume at all? Those are fair questions. The dressing-up part of historical events may be the least important aspect of the time-travel experience for you. If so, and if the events that interest you don't require historically appropriate garb, then don't worry about it.

But before you flip ahead to the first piece of fiction in this issue, give me a chance to change your mind. A large part of the pleasure of attending a Society for Creative Anachronism tourney, a Renaissance Fair, a Victorian ball, an Edwardian picnic, is the way it looks. There are times when you can gaze out over the event and nothing in your field of vision will tell you that you're anywhere near the 21st century. That's the real time traveler's experience, when for a moment, or the space of a dance, or an afternoon, you can lose yourself in the past.

If you're dressed appropriately, you're contributing to the effect for everyone around you, just as they're helping to transport you to your century of choice. And when you feel that plumed cap on your head, or the embrace of that laced bodice, you'll know you're sharing an experience with the people who lived in a time long before yours.

There's another, less noble reason to get the clothes right. It's a serious thrill to be mistaken for an insider. When a woman with a camera approaches you at a Renaissance festival and asks, "Where do they do the Queen's Tea?" you know she assumes you're a Festie. And when the actual Festies ask you, "Have you got a show, or are you doing Street?" then congratulations—you officially Fit In. (Go ahead and tell them you're a patron, they'll be pleased at the effort you've made.)

Photo by John Watkins

In this column, I'm going to suggest resources and techniques for putting together a costume more or less off the rack and on the cheap. If you get bitten by the costume bug, you'll want to go farther than this. But you can get off to a respectable start with things you can find at the local thrift store, import shop, and discount department store, with some easy modifications.

I'm also going to stick to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance this issue. Next time, I'll cover Colonial America, Regency dance clothes, and day and evening wear for the middle and late 19th century. Hey, we've got the whole of history to play in, mustn't use it up all at once.

When it comes to upper-class wear, Medieval women's clothing is easier to fake than men's. Victorian men's clothing is easier to fake than women's. Somewhere in the middle of that time continuum, say, the mid- to late 1700s, neither men nor women get the edge: aristocratic formal wear for either sex is impossible to fake.

But any century is much easier to dress for, whether you're a man or a woman, if you're willing to play the peasant. Until the 19th century there was no such thing as store-bought clothing. That means everyone made their own, or had it made for them, and the lower classes couldn't spend a lot of time or resources on their wardrobe. So fashion and the technology of tailoring changed much more slowly for the peasantry. Little did they know that they were making life easier for costumers.

Peasant clothes are not only easier to

Sumptuary Law and Custom

Medieval and Renaissance Europe saw the beginnings of the middle class, as merchants got rich trading all over the known world, and started the banks that funded the kings' wars. They got so rich, in fact, that they had the means to dress like dukes and duchesses, if not kings and queens.

Well, something needed to be done about that. The social order was obviously in peril if you couldn't tell a banker from a baron just by looking. And the wealthy of all classes were demanding imported luxury goods that fed the economies of other nations and threatened to bankrupt their own. The solution that kept rich commoners and spendthrift nobility in check for centuries was the sumptuary laws.

The sumptuary laws lay down strict rules for all levels of society, including titled ladies and gentlemen, for what fabrics, styles, trimmings, jewelry, and other adornments were appropriate to one's social position. Ermine and sable, for example, could be worn only by royalty and the highest ranking nobility. Lesser beings could wear otter, fox, or beaver; those who lacked both status and a limitless supply of firewood resorted to sheepskin, goat, or wolf.

The sumptuary laws changed as fashion did . . . and as quickly as those rich merchants gained favor for their contributions to cathedral-building and kings' war coffers. But the laws were a powerful social force, and one you should take into account when thinking about dressing for the Middle Ages or the Renaissance.

The basic guideline is very simple: The higher you are up the social ladder, the more sparkly it's appropriate for you to be. Precious stones, cloth-of-gold, velvet, elaborate and expensive trim, and the awe-inspiring use of precious metals are reserved for the upper classes. Finely woven linen and wool with handsome embroidery and a temperate splash of garnets, amber, or rock crystal set in gold or silver will tell the world you're middle class, but doing well, thank you. And of course, rough linen and leather and coarse wool are the choice of the peasant (OK, so they didn't really have a choice), with a nice wood or bone amulet or crucifix on a thong for jewelry.

A note on color: There are some folks—and many of them are costume shop directors at Renaissance fairs—who believe that purple was reserved for the exclusive use of royalty. I haven't been able to find any historical basis for that (though my saying so won't keep you out of trouble with the costume shop). The most likely origin of the notion is from ancient Rome, where only senators were allowed to have a stripe of a particular shade of purple-red, called Tyrian purple, at the border of their robes. When the Roman Republic became the Roman Empire, it became the imperial color, and dyeing things Tyrian purple became an imperial monopoly. But if you look at paintings from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, you'll see portraits of royalty in every achievable color, and mere nobility and merchants in various shades of purple.

In fact, the most luxurious, ostentatiously expensive color at the time was black. A dense, solid black was, and still is, the hardest color for a dyer to produce. So, you peasants, players, and shopkeepers, remember that for absolute authenticity, black goes with everything except a thin purse!

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fake, they're easier to wear. They tend to be loose and comfortable (you had to be able to get in the hay crop while wearing them, after all) and made of materials that let you sit on the ground without fear of dry-cleaning bills.

Locate books of art from the period that interests you to find examples of the clothing silhouette of the time. The silhouette is the general shape of you in your clothes. Some centuries preferred a slender, close-to-the-body silhouette; others featured wide shoulders or full skirts. The silhouette might also vary by region. While in England the early Tudor ladies wore long, stiff bodices and cone-shaped skirts, the ladies of Venice and Florence wore high-waisted gowns with gathered, unsupported skirts.

Other good sources of ideas are the clothing pattern catalogs from AlterYears and Amazon Dry Goods. Their illustrations will give you a wealth of information about period costume and ornamentation, even if you don't sew and don't want to. (Keep in mind though, that some pattern companies produce more authentic costumes than others. I've noticed that the more professionally the pattern illustrations are drawn, the better-researched the clothes themselves tend to be, but that's not a sure thing. If you're concerned about period accuracy, try to find two sources for any style of dress.) AlterYears and Amazon offer a similar selection of patterns, so you can choose either company—you might look over their Web sites to help you decide.

AlterYears, 8960 E. Huntington Dr., San Gabriel, CA 91775; (626) 614-9400, fax 626-614-9499, sales@AlterYears.com, http://www.alteryears.com

Amazon Dry Goods, 411 Brady St., Davenport, IA 52801-1518; (800) 798-7979, info@amazondrygoods.com, http://www.amazondrygoods.com

Choose solid colors for your costume, or patterns that are woven into the cloth, rather than printed on. Mass-produced printed fabric wasn't available until after the Renaissance. Woven checks have been around forever, though, and embroidery is a fine way to add pattern to a sleeve edge or a hem. (See the sidebar on sumptuary laws for suggested materials.) The colors that look most convincing, especially for peasant wear, are those that seem slightly faded; color permanence was hard to achieve in dyes of the time. But you don't have to be dull. Blue and red were easy and popular dye colors. So were yellow and all shades of green and brown.

The Middle Ages

The major item of clothing for men and women for most of the Middle Ages was the tunic. The most basic tunic is a pullover T-shaped garment with a wide neck that could be worn ankle-length for either sex. For men, it could be worn just below the knees, or thigh-length with leggings or hose or loose trousers. Women might wear the just-below-the-knees style with a floor-length skirt underneath. The tunic could be left loose or belted at the waist or hips. A narrow-fitting tunic might be worn under a looser, sleeveless version called a surcoat.

Tunics are easy to make . . . but if you hate to sew, or don't have time, you can still have a tunic. Look for a women's beach cover-up or pullover house dress with wide, rectangular sleeves in a subdued solid color. Guys, if the idea of venturing into the women's section of the department store or the thrift shop sets you quaking, ask a female friend to come with you for moral support and cover.

You can also find excellent tunics in import shops that specialize in Mexican or Central American clothing. Just remember, nothing with buttons (medieval and Renaissance buttons were more often decorative than functional), and for the Middle Ages, nothing with a lot of seams or structure, cuffs or collar. Your tunic shouldn't follow the lines of your body too closely.

Belt your tunic with a cloth sash, a rope or a leather tie. Mistress, if you'd like to wear an underskirt beneath your tunic, try for one that's not too wide around the hips or the hem, to keep your silhouette fairly smooth and vertical. Master, the trousers under your short tunic should be straight

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and pocketless and not jeans. For a pair of drawstring waist, easy fitting cotton trousers, check out the "lounge pants" in the pajama section of the men's department. They're cheap, comfortable, and will look good either cross-gartered (wrapped with cord or ribbon from just below your knee down to your ankle, which looks snappy and keeps one's trouser hems out of the mud and briars) or tucked into your boots.

Ah, footgear. During this period, all shoes and boots were sewn by hand. They didn't have thick soles or heels, because cobblers didn't have the equipment to make them. You can find Chinese cotton shoes, sometimes called tai ch'i shoes, at large Asian groceries or import shops (or online). The most common kind is black and sort of loafer-shaped, with insets of elastic on each side. The elastic isn't authentic, of course, but t'ai chi shoes are as close as you can get, in store-bought, to the soft cloth shoes of the Middle Ages.

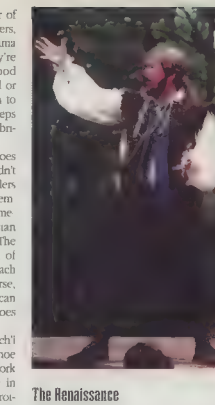
In the bin next to the elastic sided tai ch'i shoes you'll find a scoop front cotton shoe with a strap across the instep. These work well, too, and are sometimes available in other colors, or in velvet, or with embroidery on them. They're only available in women's sizes, though. Another Chinese style, much harder to find but very handsome, is a black cotton ankle boot that laces up the back. These are extremely authentic (except for the rubber soles). And Chinese cotton shoes are the cheapest ever.

But if you'd like to spend a little more money and get more durable footwear, look for some of the offerings from Minnetonka Moccasins. These are the "Indian moccasins" sold at every tourist shop in every place there ever were Native Americans. You can also find them on the Web at www.minnetonkamocc.com, among other online vendors.

Minnetonka makes lace-up suede boots with thin, hard rubber soles in knee-high, ankle, or below-the-ankle styles, and a suede ankle boot with a two-button side closure. All are appropriate for the period except for one thing: you'll have to cut off the ornamental fringe on the seams or cuffs. There's no technological reason why no one wore fringe-cuffed boots during this period, but there's no evidence that anyone did. So cut the fringe off, or if you're feeling crafty, take off the cuff (it's a separate piece) and replace it with a piece of unfringed leather, which is authentic.

Back at your import shop, you may find cloth "pillbox" hats in brocade, velvet, or handwoven cotton, or an oversize beret that will pass for the slouchy, floppy "bag caps" of the time. Sew a band or two of ribbon trim on the hem of your tunic if you want to disguise its origins and add a spiffy touch.

All right, you're dressed. Go heckle the Black Knight at the tourney!



Minnetonka Moccasins Partner

The Renaissance

Clothing became a bit more sophisticated during the Renaissance, but that only makes it easier for 21st-century time travelers to fake. Men, you're still in loose pullover shirts with wide sleeves, but they can have band cuffs and soft, foldover collars. They might have a slit partway down the front that laces closed or that ties at the neck. They still don't have buttons, though.

There's a very nice style of shirt from Ecuador, with a little pleating on the front, that can be made to work even though it has a buttoned placket that opens halfway down. Just cut the buttons off and sew on embroidered or solid-color ribbon of the same width as the placket to hide it. While you're at it, sew some trim on the band collar and cuffs.

Women, those "peasant blouses" with the gathered neckline and the big, blousey sleeves? They're made to look like the tops of Renaissance period ladies' chemises, which were long undergowns that women wore under full skirts and lace-up vest-like bodices. If you're not planning to kilt up your skirts, you can use the blouse-length version. If you'd like a proper chemise-length chemise, though, see if you can find a heavy cotton nightgown with similar lines.

The cotton lounge pants mentioned above, or any similar baggy drawstring pants (that aren't sweatpants—there was no fleece in the Renaissance) are as useful for this period as for the Middle Ages. You can wear them the same way as described earlier. You can cut them off at mid-thigh and leave the hems to ravel, for a piratical, riff-raff look. Or you can cut them, fold over a casing at the hem, and slide a drawstring through it. Snug up the drawstring just below your knee, and you've made a decent pair of breeches to wear with knee-high socks or tights.

It's not easy to find an ankle-length gathered skirt in a nonformal fabric, but that's what a Renaissance peasant woman needs. You can get a nice effect by wearing two lightweight long skirts and hiking the outer one up and tucking it into your belt to show the one underneath.

Something vest-like makes a nice finish to a Renaissance costume. It's possible to stop with shirt and trousers for men, the shirt worn outside and belted, and blouse and skirt for women, with a bright sash or wide belt. But an open-front, unfitted vest, either waist-length or down to your fingertips, is a sharp touch for guys and is another item to look for at the import shop.

For women, the equivalent is the very tight, very fitted, low-cut bodice that laces up the front, side, or back. There really isn't a modern equivalent. You can accomplish good things with a shawl, though, to make your costume look finished. Try to find a very large square one. Fold it in half, triangle-wise, and drape it over your shoulders. Now cross the ends in front of your stomach, wrap them around your waist, and tie them behind your back.

Convincing footgear for the Renaissance is the same as for the Middle Ages. That pill box hat and floppy beret also work in this period. Another head covering option, for both men and women, is a solid color square cotton scarf, also folded triangle-wise. Women can tie it over their heads like a kerchief; men can wear it pirate-style, further forward on their foreheads with the ends knotted over the point of the triangle. (If all the square cotton scarves in the world seem to have bandanna prints on them, try the linens section of the discount department store for big napkins.)

Now you've got the basics of medieval and Renaissance costuming, but only the basics. As your knowledge of the period grows, and you become more involved in historical recreation events, you'll want more sophisticated costumes. When you go to events, cruise the vendors for new pieces that add to your costume and your idea of your character. You'll find that anything you can imagine can be made or bought. The need to improve your outfit may lead you to take up leatherworking, weaving, or jewelry-making. And trust me, that won't be a bad thing.

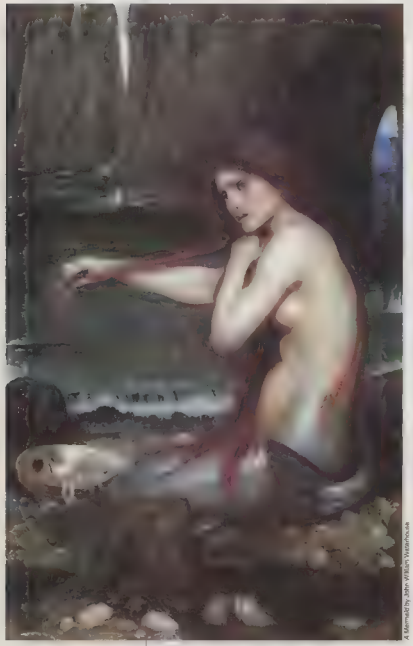
Until next issue, then, when we make a mighty leap into the 18th century and beyond ... (If you'd like to pass along your own costuming tips, or alert me to historical recreation events around the country that *Realms of Fantasy* readers would enjoy, please send mail or e-mail to me, care of the magazine: *Realms of Fantasy*, 441 Carlisle Dr., Herndon, VA 20170; lcleveland@sovhomestead.com.)

YOUR ANCESTRY HAS MADE YOU A WARRIOR. YOUR FATE WILL MAKE YOU A CHAMPION.

Somewhere between [illegible] your epic crusade begins as a [illegible] by sinister sp[illegible] [illegible] a descendant of King Richard the Lionhearted [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

By Heinz Insu Fenkl

Mermaid lore and legend have intrigued and seduced us for centuries.



A Mermaid by John William Waterhouse

A mermaid's long flowing hair symbolized her "abundant love potential."

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each
I do not think that they will sing to me
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown
—T.S. Eliot,
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

an Eve figure overlaid with the cult of the Virgin, a sealed vessel enclosing either sexual temptation or sexual virtue, or some paradoxical and potent mixture of the two
—Carol Shields, *The Republic of Love*

Recently, as I was waiting in line at the local Starbucks, I overheard two customers arguing about the Starbucks' logo. Is it a siren or a mermaid? The current logo doesn't give enough visual information, as one customer pointed out, but the original logo was a creature with the upper half of a woman and a split fish tail—a mermaid by his reckoning. The other customer pointed out that Starbucks refers to the image as a siren. Could they be wrong about their own corporate logo? The argument was lively enough to pique the interest of other customers, and soon various bits of interesting information came up, including reference to an online debate about the nature of mermaid sexuality and, specifically, the reproductive organs of Disney's Ariel. I, myself, did not join in this debate but merely kept within earshot, considering the price of a latte well worth this synchronistic field research.

As some readers may know, Starbucks had to change its corporate logo because some consumers found the suggestive split tail of its topless siren too lurid and sexually suggestive. A simplified logo was introduced, hiding the siren's breasts under waves of hair, and that in turn was cropped and enlarged so the split in the siren's tail would no longer show. The only indication now that the female icon is a sea creature is in the wavy lines, which originally were part of the representation of the two tails. And yes, although the image is that of a split-tailed sea creature, it is a siren. More specifically, it is a double-tailed siren, a baubo siren, which *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* points out, is "a cross between a mermaid and a sheila-na-gig" and is found as a decorative motif in many European churches and cathedrals. "Her suggestive pose, like that of the sheila-na-gig, referred to female sexual mysteries in particular."

Sheila-na-gig is a general reference to female figures that prominently display their genitalia to sug-

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Ariel, by Jenny Dolfen and Living Mermaid Dolls by Jessica Mancini King

The word "mermaid" is related to the French words for sea and mother, and one of its underlying meanings, "virgin mother," links it to the Virgin Mary.

nify the power of female sexuality and fertility. These images are also quite prominent in the decoration of sacred sites in general and are thought to be a legacy of the older Goddess religions whose holy sites were usually taken over by later religions. The shape of the genitalia in these squatting figures is also symbolic of the *vesica piscis*, the "vesse, of the fish," which is also associated with Christ. The well-known Christian "fish" symbol (seen prominently on the backs of many cars these days) is the ICHTHYS referring to the Greek acronym for "Jesus Christ Son of God."

We tend to associate the equation of Christ and fish with the miracle of the loaves and fishes, or the fact that some of the disciples were fishermen (Christ as the fisherman of souls), but the symbol has an older origin connected with a more ancient myth. *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* notes that "Ichthys was the name of a son of the ancient Sea-goddess, Atargatis, also known as Tirgata, Aphrodite, Derceto, Salacia, Pelagia, or Delphine, whose name meant both 'womb' and 'dolphin', all appeared in mermaid form. In a way, however, Jesus could be called the same Ichthys as the son of Sea-mother Mari, whose blue robe, pearl necklace, and much-varied name referred to the world's oceans: Maria, Marina, Marian, Mariamne, Myrrhine, Myrrha, Mari Yamm, Mari El, and Stella Maris, the Star of the Sea."

Now that I've laid out this complex set of connections, let me return to the figure of the mermaid, which is at the center of these associations. There are two excellent and encyclopedic essays available online regarding the mermaid: "Mermaids—Spirits or Goddesses?" by Patience Gent, and "Shadows of the Goddess: The Mermaid" by Scarlett deMason. Both are accessible by Googling the authors or titles, and so I shall begin by centering my discussion on current representations.

The most well-known mermaid in contemporary American culture is, of course, Ariel, the sanitized and disempowered representation who serves a heterosexual marriage plot typical of Disney films. Ariel is not only nice, she is, in many ways, an inversion of the mythic mermaid. She sacrifices her beautiful voice to gain the temporary legs that will allow her to woo her terrestrial love, Eric. While the traditional mermaids are said to seduce sailors with the sound of their beautiful singing, luring them into shipwreck and death in order to consume their souls (because they, themselves, lack a soul), Ariel does exactly the reverse. She saves Eric from a shipwreck and when she marries him to become a terrestrial princess, she figuratively becomes his soulmate. It's as if Disney set out systematically to obliterate the traditional mermaid mythos. There is nothing inherently attractive about Eric (except his appearance, in contrast to the purposely distorted images of his fellow sailors). For Ariel, he represents the epitome of things human, to which she has an irrational attraction. (There are symbolic elements in their affinity for each other, but that requires deconstruction too detailed to engage in here. For an excellent discussion of Disney's Ariel as a denigrated Mary Magdalene figure, see the online essay, "The Little Mermaid' and the Archetype of the Lost 'Bride'" by Margaret Starbird, which also explains why mermaids are so frequently seen with books.)

In the wake of Ariel's romantic happy ending, we are left with the image of King Triton—a Neptune/Poseidon/Oannes figure—exchanging himself as hostage for his daughter (in an interesting reversal of what happens between father and daughter in "Beauty and the Beast") and an inverted image of the great, nurturing Sea-mother as represented in Ursula, the Sea witch. Oannes, the primal godlike fish man is disempowered; the Great Goddess, associated with the sea, is turned into an evil witch. These inversions and disempowerments are actually parallel to how religions build on top of earlier ones—Christianity did precisely the same thing to earlier mythic traditions.

In contrast to Ariel, and yet reflective of the same underlying ideology, is the siren/mermaid featured in the recent horror film, *She Creature*. This mermaid, who can periodically become a legged woman, turns out to be the great Queen Mother of all mermaids. She seduces men and literally eats them, and her sexual power also influences the sexuality of other women. (The film does an excellent job of establishing "traditional" mermaid lore, but disintegrates into an imitation of *Aliens* by its conclusion, making an interesting connection even with its narrative shortcomings.)

Suggested Readings

Story collections: *A Treasury of Mermaids: Mermaid Tales from Around the World*, by Shirley Climo; *Mermaid Tales from Around the World*, by Mary Pope Osborne; *Mermaids*, by Elizabeth Rees-Jones. Coffee-table books with essays: *From the Deep Waters: Maidens of Myth and Mystery*, edited by Toshikuki Takaniya; *Mermaids: Nymphs of the Sea*, by Theodore Gracieux; *Sirens: Symbols of Seduction*, by Mari Pesaco-Lacy; Odile Oliphant (Translator), Mari Lacy. A museum book: *The Tale of the Mermaid: An Essay on the Folklore and Mythology of the Mermaid, Accompanied by Illustrations of Objects from the Exhibition*, by Lee-Ellen Griffith.

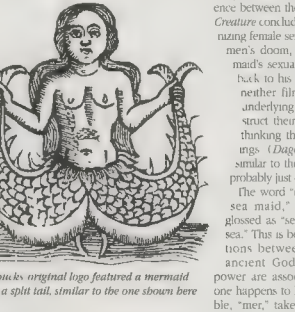
You may also wish to explore some of the Web sites used for fiction, such as Water Fae: Water Faeries http://www.theforeservers.com/waterfaeries.html.

DRAGONLANCE
THE WORLD OF DRAGONLANCE
IS NOW YOURS TO EXPLORE
BRING THE PAGES TO LIFE

The mercreature has appeared prominently in popular films (like *Splash*, which gives us another sanitized mermaid who saves a drowning man and leaves the sea for him), in television shows (Alyssa Milano recently turned into a mermaid in an episode of "Charmed"), commercials (most notably a European Levis commercial, too racy to show in the U.S.), and in music videos (including one by Madonna). In its siren form, it also appears in the film *Dagon*, a mediocre and yet interesting interpretation of H P Lovecraft's mythos *Dagon* is a bit tedious in its depiction of the weird fishing village literally devolving back into the sea, but its mermaid presents a prime example of how the old mythos can be reconstituted, even without systematically intending to do so

The mermaid in *Dagon* appears in the dreams of the hapless protagonist, a young man destined to become her husband She "calls" to him through a psychic connection, using her siren like power and when they finally meet, we discover that she is both the daughter of the Cthuluvian fish god and a sort of high priestess in the ancient religion that has destroyed and replaced the local Catholicism She tries to seduce the protagonist, but as their passionate embrace begins, he discovers her split fish tail and runs away in disgust and horror

The mermaid's ultimate purpose is to mate with the protagonist and spawn a new race When he realizes he cannot resist her, upon learning that she is his own sister, the protagonist tries to kill himself with purify



Starbucks original logo featured a mermaid with a split tail, similar to the one shown here

ing fire But that, too, fails, and in the final scene we see the two of them swimming deep in the ocean, approaching a black pit at the center of a symbol that is both the Eye of God and the *vesica piscis* The mermaid's split tail swishes gracefully behind her as they approach the Abyss.

Dagon and *She Creature* both emphasize the mermaid's irresistibility, her perverse sexuality, and her danger to both the man's body and soul. The major symbolic difference between the two films is that while *She Creature* concludes by privileging and demonizing female sexuality, linking that theme to men's doom, *Dagon* also uses the mermaid's sexuality to finally bring the man back to his "true" nature Unfortunately, neither film is truly in control of its underlying theme both of them construct their mermaid symbols without thinking through their ultimate meanings (*Dagon*'s mermaid is uncannily similar to the Starbucks siren, but that is probably just coincidence.)

The word "mermaid" is usually read as sea maid," but it is more properly glossed as "sea maiden" or "virgin of the sea." This is because of the many connections between the mermaid and the ancient Goddess, whose origin and power are associated with the sea But if one happens to know French, the first syllable, "mer," takes on another significance, which is not merely an accident of etymology *mer* is "sea," and it sounds much like *mère* or "mother." Without going into the Indo-European origins for words that sound like "mare" or the prefix "mer" (ranging

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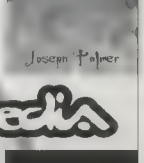

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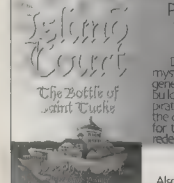

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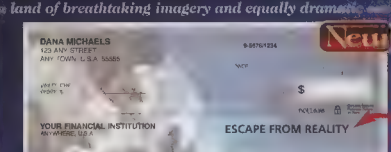

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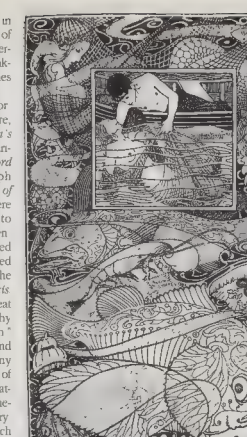
from the mother horse to the "mer" in "merry"), let it suffice to say that one of the underlying deep meanings of "mermaid" is "virgin mother," directly linking the term and the figure it names with the Virgin Mary.

There are three other bits of information worth bringing together here, all mentioned in *The Woman's Dictionary*, though gleaned from various sources ranging from the *Oxford English Dictionary* to Joseph Campbell's multivolume *The Masks of God*. First, the mermaid and siren were terms and symbols that referred to prostitutes in the 16th and 17th centuries. Second, "The ancients insisted that women's sexual secretions smelled like fish, which is why the sign of the *yoni* came to be called *vesica piscis*." One of the Hindu titles of the Great Goddess was 'a virgin named Fishy Smell, whose real name was Truth" (quoting from Joseph Campbell). And third, "Medieval books of alchemy described the mermaid as the Siren of the Philosophers, crowned and lactating the milk of enlightenment," something also attributed to the Virgin Mary. (There are Medieval paintings in which St. Sebastian is suckling from Mary's breast to drink this divine milk.)

Every culture has its mermaid figures, but it is those from Western traditions that are especially relevant to my discussion here: the Celtic selkie, the morgens of Brittany, the German nixie, the Norwegian havfrau, the veen of Finland, the tritonids and nereids of Greece, and the vedava of Eastern Europe. (The mermaids and water spirits of East Asia and Africa follow similar universal themes, but play somewhat different roles in their cultures, in part due to differing attitudes toward sexuality.)

Scarlett deMason notes that the mermaid's "abundant, flowing hair, symbolizing an abundant love potential, was also an attribute of Venus in her role as fertility goddess. Her comb ... earned sexual connotations for the Greeks, as their words for comb, *ktetis* and *pecten*, also signified the female vulva. Thus the mermaid is the surviving aspect of the old goddesses." Regardless of where we begin our interpretation of the mermaid, or which analytic path we take, we are brought back, again and again, to the ancient Great Goddess, the archetype behind the figure of Mary, who in Christian culture is usually split into the virginal Madonna and the holy prostitute. The mermaid ultimately signifies the fundamental mystery of female sexuality, particularly for men who, because they cannot comprehend it, are simultaneously drawn to it and terrified by it. That is why the mermaid becomes so easily conflated with the siren and her irresistible call that leads men to their doom.



Mermaids represent the attraction to and fear of female sexuality in Western tradition.

This simultaneous attraction to and fear of female sexuality as the underlying logic behind the mermaid is actually confirmed by other mythological half-humans. The male counterpart to the mermaid, the triton, lacks the mermaid's mystery and seductiveness; he is actually a sort of aquatic satyr (a kind of male nymphomaniac). Other prominent half man and half animal figures, including the Minotaur (with a bull's head) and the centaur (with a horse's body and so also its genitalia), all exaggerate masculine phallic power, while the mermaid represents and amplifies what men fundamentally lack. It is only the holiest of masculine figures, like Christ, who are both born of the figurative mermaid and maintain a direct symbolic connection to their aquatic origins. (Even the Buddha shows such a connection, since he is the son of Maya, who is associated with the moon. Many representations of the Buddha include webbed fingers as one of his divine markings.)

The truth one learns from the mermaid-siren is that patriarchy, especially the Judeo-Christian variety, is a relative latecomer in human history. The new religions could not, and cannot, ever overwrite the undercurrents of the more ancient traditions that preceded them, regardless of how concerted their efforts to do so.

And so the Starbucks logo is a brilliant piece of design which, oddly enough, resonates with much of what I've discussed here. The original logo made quite explicit that Starbucks was using the lure of female sexuality to draw the customers to their coffee, but now you can see that the coffee is linked to the double lure of ultimate wisdom and the pleasures of the flesh. The name of the company, about which there is relatively little deep inquiry, actually makes the connection even more interesting. Apparently, the owners of Starbucks originally wanted to call their company "Moby's Coffee," referring to Moby Dick, the great white whale in Herman Melville's classic novel (which is read as a Christian allegory, the whale representing Christ). But bringing up the image of a giant whale was deemed potentially unattractive for coffee drinkers. And so a new logo was designed, but the name "Starbucks" maintains the connection to Moby Dick. Starbuck is the name of the coffee-drinking first mate from Nantucket, the only man who challenges the mad Ahab.

The name also conveniently brings up the idea of stardom and big bucks—both very appealing to the typical American consumer. On a more cynical note, Starbuck happens to be the name of the charismatic con man in *The Rainmaker*—a connection that makes one wonder, given that Starbucks originated in rainy Seattle. My more sinister reading—a more interesting one that connects the siren logo back to Mary—is to trace the name farther back to the story of the *Essex*, the whaling ship on which Melville's *Pequod* was based. At the beginning of Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea: The Epic True Story That Inspired Moby Dick*, one finds these curious facts: "English Nantucketers resisted all attempts to establish a church on the island, partly because a woman by the name of Mary Coffin Starbuck forbade it. It was said that nothing of consequence was done on Nantucket without Mary's approval. Mary Coffin and Nathaniel Starbuck had been the first English couple to be married on the island...." That is, Mary was the first to "mate", her last name is associated with death and also sounds like "coffee", and her first name associates her directly with the sea and Mary Magdalene. (It's enough to make you think you're hearing the theme from *The X-Files*.)

No wonder Starbucks has been so successful, and no wonder they have so many outlets in Barnes & Noble stores, which sell books—a source of wisdom. You may have purchased this copy of *Realms* at a Barnes & Noble; you may be reading it while sipping a cup of Starbucks latte. The mermaid-siren may be a vestige of ancient myth and folklore, but its lure is as pervasive and as powerful as ever.

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By Gahan Wilson

Two new fantasy novels teach us something about our world and ourselves.

One of the great powers of fantasy is its genuinely magical ability to reveal and cast a bright light upon aspects of reality that are difficult, if not impossible, to be seen when viewed "realistically." Skillfully handled fantasy lifts readers from their ordinary world and sets them convincingly in the midst of an impossible adventure in a fantastic terrain where they are forced to abandon ordinary expectations and assumptions. To navigate and survive, they must learn new skills and be open to receive new insights. This not only allows the author to show readers how to slay an emerald-bodied, four-winged dragon with an elvish sword, but it also sneakily makes the readers vulnerable to teachings which their wakeworld selves might refuse to hear.

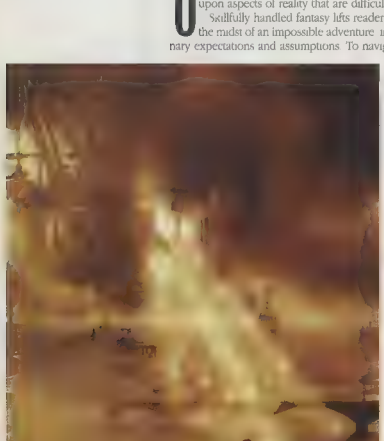

Illustration by Steve Stone © 2003

Ian R. MacLeod's first novel, The Light Ages, *is packed with adventures and wonders Gahan Wilson calls it "an extraordinary book."*

Parents from time immemorial have used this technique to teach their children little moral verities by means of bedtime stories, Plato tried (unsuccessfully) to diminish our astoundingly destructive hubris by speaking of Atlantis, and it may be possible that modern fantacists such as H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell have actually altered the course of history by subtly manipulating the brains of the world's movers and shakers.

The Light Ages (Ace Books, NYC, hardcover, 456 pp., $23.95) is very much in the tradition of these last three writers and I suspect that if its author, Ian R. MacLeod, stays the course set by this really outstanding first novel, he may end up persuading sufficient politicians, mad scientists, and corporate entity builders to reconsider the attractiveness of Armageddon and turn their talents to leading humankind in more promising and constructive directions than is presently the case.

The handout that came with the book is quite right to point out the connections of *The Light Ages* with the work of Charles Dickens, creator of possibly the most successfully bare-faced teaching fantasy of all time, *A Christmas Carol,* which literally—no pun intended!—created that holiday as we presently know it.

Not only is it as fully packed with direct political comment, but it is set in a bizarre version of the same time and place as most of Dickens' novels. But instead of the driving force of the society presented being the Industrial Revolution, we have an England whose wealth and power are based entirely on the massive mining of aether, the magical fifth element of the alchemists and early modern science.

In the world of *The Light Ages* it is the generator of power that has made the control of huge machines and the vast factories that contain them possible. It runs the trolleys, it powers the telegraph, and it has produced the enormous wealth that a fortunate few use to run the rest of society from the high echelons of its elaborately structured guilds all the way down to the powerless and impoverished multitudes referred to as "mars."

Robert Borrows, the very Dickensian hero of the novel, is born to a working-class family living on Brickyard Row in the quaint Yorkshire mining town of Bracebridge. Every minute of every day of his young life has been accompanied by the steady SHOOM BOOM SHOOM BOOM produced by the

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machinery in the deepest reaches of the aether mine

The town has a cozy, touching innocence to it, the workers by and large trusting what they are told, the families obeying the local ways scrupulously But a very ominous undertone shows itself in dark ways, most portentously when the Trollman comes to gather up someone who has shown himself to be a changeling, poisoned by the malign side effects of aether mining, and carts the poor soul off to St Bates Hospice and Asylum where his continuing and increasingly hideous alterations can take place in the darkness out of of public view

Robert's family is severely affected by the poisoning, he meets the remarkable Mistress Sommerton and her beautiful ward, Annalise, who make him realize there is much more to the world than this little mining town, and when the local problems continue to become increasingly depressing and the pull of the outer world grows far too strong, he drops from Bracebridge's bridge to land on a freight train bound for London. There he experiences amazing adventures and a remarkable career that will bring him into contact with the very highest in the land and a deepening relationship with the beautiful and very mysterious Annalise

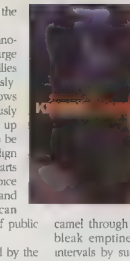
I think that's enough of rattling on about the plot which is a fine one, mind packed full with adventures and wonders The main thing I want to do is announce that I think this really is an extraordinary book You will enjoy it, and very much but I will wager that won't be all that happens I am personally willing to admit publicly that I found reading *The Light Ages* to be very helpful, and I actually suspect I may be a slightly more tolerable human for having read it. We shall see if I am being overly optimistic

In any case, be that as it may, I highly recommend it and hope that you don't miss reading it

The Etched City (Prime Books, Inc., Canton, OH, trade paperback, 332 pp , $16 95) is very pleasantly contradictory novel in a wide variety of ways. It is thoroughly unpretentious but unafraid to delve deeply into all manner of mysteries. It features a cast of hard bitten loners who, for all their bitterness and fatigue, are still passionately full of life, and though it reads like the work of some seasoned pro who has strengthened and developed her skills by crafting shelves of varied works, *The Etched City* is K J Bishop's very first novel.

She's obviously a born storyteller, a real yarner, and from the first page to the last I was as absorbed and pleased and thoroughly entertained as a child is in its bed when listening to a grownup genuinely skilled in bedtime storytelling

The heroine is Raule, a very tough, very intelligent dark beauty riding the back of a camel through hard desert country where bleak emptiness is broken only at long intervals by such unencouraging things as half-buried canons poking out of the sand, skeletons of previous travelers along the same route, and dessicated ruins whispered to contain ghouls and afreets The place very satisfactorily combines the sinister charms of a doomed Clark Ashton Smith landscape with those equally doomed ones to be found in the grimmer Spaghetti Westerns, and I expect it owes a good deal of its flavor to Australia, which is the author's homeland



Raule is an itinerant physician just barely eking out a living by treating the wounds and diseases of folk she comes across in dried-up little villages and caravan encampments. She is making her way across this harsh wasteland in hopes of escaping the merciless displeasure of a sinister General Anforth and his Army of Heroes and wants to find refuge from him at its far border

As we are introduced to her, Raule comes across a dreary cluster of shacks forming a kind of town, enters its dismal inn built of old scrap metal, and discovers a scurvy band of rascals playing serious cards for wudges of money that had belonged to the inn's proprietor before one of the rogues split his head for some small offense and left him dead on the floor for the flies to feed on

Raule gives no sign that the tall gamer among them wearing a black domino mask is an old friend and associate of hers, the ominous and terrifyingly capable gun and sword slinger Gwynn After the longtime companions exchange quiet little signals of greeting unnoticed by the other gamers, Raule leaves their company after a little disarming banter to avoid her own murder. She wanders off to nap outside until she is awakened, not all that unexpectedly, by the sound of gunfire produced by Gwynn killing his former associates after they turned upon him when it became obvious he was winning all the money

Raule and Gwynn soon come to an agreement—based on what turns out to be their shared wish to have as little to do as possible with the above-mentioned General Anforth—to increase this little bonanza by selling the camels and weapons of the slaughtered rascals and using it to travel to and settle in the legendary city of Ashamoil and there start a new, hopefully somewhat safer, life.

You will not regret traveling with them to Ashamoil as it's a complexly interesting city full of varied and intriguing places to explore, fascinating stuff to see, and stimulating people to meet Among these latter, my own personal favorite is the Reverend, an excellent and very touching fellow gifted with strange powers that only tease him agonizingly He and Gwynn soon form the regular habit of drinking more than is good for them once a week, while the Rev tirelessly and unsuccessfully attempts to persuade Gwynn to abandon his murderous ways of life and seek salvation

Raule goes through a complex series of transformations and discoveries beginning with establishing a clinic for the poor and culminating in a profound involvement with magically creating art

This last is a theme very seldom explored in fantasy and Bishop dives into it deeply and comes up with delightful visions and notions, which I will not go into as she unfolds them very well and I would not like to diminish the surprises and startlements.

Even if you don't read the book, and I very much hope you do, please do peruse the following meditation from Raule on her art as it's a trenchant cautionary comment on our attempts to mold this planet and what lives upon it "We modern demiurges are prolific copyists; we give few things souls of their own Locomotives with their close resemblance to beasts, may be the great exception, but in nearly all else with which today's poor humans are filling the world, I see a quelling of the numinous, an ashening of the fire of life. We are making an inert world, we are building a cemetery.

I personally found that to be an excellent summation of a general drift I've noticed going on these days, not to mention one hell of a strong warning

Would that our movers and shakers could pause in their righteous bustling and seriously meditate upon it while taking a few deep breaths.

Another new talent you might find well worth exposing yourself to is Gemma Files, a writer of short stories prodding areas of fantasy very often shunned But be warned! These are genuinely disturbing little works

There is a range of quality in ***Kissing Carrion*** (Prime Books, Canton OH, trade paperback, 223 pp , $17 95). Unlike Bishop, you can tell this a talent—I think quite a considerable one—in the early stages of its development, but there's not a story among them that isn't an honest effort from the heart and none that lacks impact. You will not be bored and they are all worthy of study

Also not to worry, because we have an astutely droll introduction to guide us writ-

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ten by the formidable Caitlin R. Kiernan who not only does a fine job of pointing out to us the author's most successful efforts, but makes some very trenchant observations on the field of dark fantasy in general, the sort I wish I heard more often. She speaks of the terrible importance of honest passion and poetry and—above all—compassion, which is an absolute must when seriously writing about sadness and horror and mortality.

I hope you'll excuse another quote: "I think Gemma Files has grasped the fine and crucial line between pornography and a true literature of the extreme. At least I hope she has. Something is keeping her voice hung just high enough above the pit that we can hear it clearly without tumbling in and drowning. In the end, if we are wise enough to pay attention, we find she's made us look away from the pit, up, towards the stars overhead and probably out of reach."

Ms. Files deserves every word

Gahan Wilson

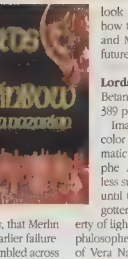
Celtika, Book One of the Merlin Codex, Robert Holdstock, Tor, NY, hardcover, 368 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 0-765-30692-1

World Fantasy Award-winner Robert Holdstock's new fantasy, *Celtika, Book One of the Merlin Codex*, is the most audacious re-imagining of Merlin and the Arthurian mythos since A.A. Attanasio's 1996 tour de force, *The Dragon and the Unicorn*.

Holdstock's idea is to link two isolated constellations of myth and legend by means of a single character common to both. This he accomplishes by deftly shoehorning a hero from the later myth into the earlier one, the notion may not be original, but the author's choice is inspired. Thus, centuries prior to his association with Uther Pendragon, the Merlin of *Celtika* falls in with another love-besotted king: Jason, captain of the Argonauts and husband of the witch Medea.

The phrase "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" pretty much sums up the story of Medea. Betrayed by Jason, she took an infamous revenge by murdering their two sons, then fled. Jason died years later, a broken man: literally—a piece of wood from his famous ship, the *Argo*, fell and crushed him. It is impossible to study Greek mythology without concluding that the greatest of their gods was Irony.

In Holdstock's version, Merlin and Jason are helpless witnesses to Medea's crime. Merlin's magic failing just when it is needed most. The boys perish, and Medea escapes, leaving a desolate dad and a guilt-wracked wizard. Except ... the boys aren't dead. Medea has sent them into the future, where—or so she thinks—Jason will never find them. He, meanwhile, doesn't die when the *Argo* smites him, but sinks into a kind of hibernation, preserved by the magic of the ship at the bottom of an icy northern lake.



It is there, seven centuries later, that Merlin comes seeking to atone for his earlier failure. In his wanderings, Merlin has stumbled across Jason's eldest son, Theosokorus, grown to young manhood and raised as a Celt. Jason, awakened by Merlin from his long sleep, is soon repairing the *Argo* and recruiting fresh Argonauts.

Of primary interest among the new crew are Urtha, leader of a band of Celts from Britain (whose name suggests that he may prove to be an ancestor of Arthur), and Niav, a saucy, if rather sinister, young witch who turns out to be Merlin's great-great-great-something granddaughter, the product of what might be termed a youthful indiscretion had Merlin not been thousands of years old at the time. And then there is Mielikki, a frosty forest goddess whose by-no-means-willing spirit is incarnated within *Argo* to make the ship a sentient magical being.

The trail of Jason's sons leads first to a Britain ravaged by revenants from the Land of the Shadows of Heroes, and thence to Greece, where a Celtic army is mounting an invasion to reclaim treasures stolen from them over the centuries. Along the way, a grim and mysterious adversary stalks the *Argo*—could it be that Medea, too, has survived?

Holdstock's Merlin is not the lovably cantankerous old magician popularized by Disney and T.H. White, and later deified as Dumbledore, but a tragically flawed enchanter who is human, all too human ... except, of course, like Gandalf, he *isn't* human. What then? Angel? Demon? Holdstock scatters clues but provides no answers. The Merlin of these pages is a magical miser, he keeps a ruggardly hold on his spells, the use of which causes him to age in direct proportion to the magnitude of magic employed. His fear of aging, which he equates with decrepitude rather than wisdom, leads him again and again to hold back at crucial moments, to blind himself to difficult truths about himself and others, and to give less of himself than he seems to be offering, as the mortals who befriend him sooner or later learn to their sorrow and quite justifiable anger.

Yet though Merlin's hang-ups make him an unreliable narrator, they do not render him an unsympathetic one. With *Celtika, The Merlin Codex* gets off to a briskly entertaining start; I look forward to learning more about how the tangled pasts of Jason, Merlin, and Medea will lead to the once and future king.

Lords of Rainbow, Vera Nazarian, Betancourt & Company, PA, hardcover, 389 pp., $34.95, ISBN: 1-59224-823-3

Imagine a world, once as flush with color as our own, rendered monochromatic through a supernatural catastrophe. And imagine that world of countless subtle grays persisting for centuries, until the manner of its maiming is forgotten and the idea of color as a property of light has become a subject fit only for philosophers and magicians. This is the world of Vera Nazarian's *Lords of Rainbow*. (Ms. Nazarian generously includes this reviewer in the novel's acknowledgments.)

Nazarian's characters and their relationships are vividly drawn, especially Ranhéas Ylir, a mercenary with an agile sword arm, a fierce independent streak, and a tendency toward hirsuteness that has left her so convinced of her unattractiveness to the opposite sex that, despite her profession, she remains a virgin. For the most part, Nazarian's prose reflects a disciplined, attentive eye and a sensitive ear—with one exception. Every nongray color in the novel is italicized, a regrettable affectation that results in too many passages like this: "There were clear glowing *reds* and pale pulsing *scarlets*, shimmering faint silver *rose* with flecks of *colorless* gray in it, razor intense *burgundy*, living *cherry*."

A more serious problem is Nazarian's magical system, in which artificial colors are given tangible expression by adepts able to manifest memories, scrupulously passed down from generation to generation, of the original, lost colors. The lost originals themselves are the essences of divinities who have also left the world behind, while continuing to haunt the dreams of Ranhéas and others. Each god is the expression of the spiritual attributes of a particular color; these attributes correspond to qualities present or absent in the characters of the novel, whose inner transformations are matched by outer colorations.

This system is more mystical than magical, and its formulaic correspondences of colors and qualities, as exact as they are arbitrary, impose the straightjacket of allegory on the novel. Allegories codify the mysterious; fantasies embrace it. Nazarian wants to do both. Given her talent and ambition, she may one day succeed in forging a hybrid of these two opposing modes of storytelling, but in *Lords of Rainbow*, it is allegory that triumphs. Though the novel soars in places, the weight of imposed meaning finally pulls it down.

The Witch Queen, Jan Siegel, Del Rey, NY, hardcover, 341 pp., $24.00, ISBN: 0-345-43903-1

Here we have the final volume in Jan

Continued on page 112

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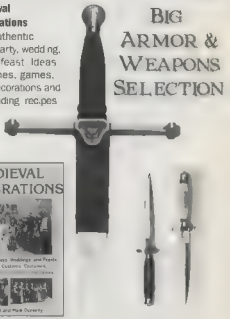

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Okra, Sorghum, Yam

A well-rounded personality is the key to good health. If this is true for talking vegetables, how much more true is it for a princess?

By Bruce Holland Rogers
Illustration by Mona Caron

So the following summer when the second princess came to Old Kwaku's hut, he said, "What do *you* want?"

"My father said that I must learn wisdom from you."

"And is that what you want?"

"I wouldn't mind being wise, but when my sister returned from here last summer her hands were rough and red. She said she hadn't learned anything at all. What if I go home like that? What man will marry a princess who has a farmer's hands?"

"And if you must work to become wise?"

"I hope that you'll have better luck than you did with my sister, however you do it. Make me wise, and my father will be pleased. Then he will marry me to a prince rich in goats and cattle. I'll dress in fine clothes and have twice as many servants as I have now."

"So it's wisdom you want?"

Do I look like a girl who wastes her time? Yes, I want wisdom! Stop asking the same question and get on with it!"

So Old Kwaku, he told her what he had told her sister, that she must work with him in the fields all summer and through the harvest if she wanted to learn wisdom. She didn't like that idea one bit, but she couldn't go back to her father and say that she hadn't tried.

In his vegetable garden, Old Kwaku planted collard and okra and cowpeas. He showed the second princess how to cut the weeds down with a sharpened stick.

"I don't think I'm learning any wisdom," she said. "And look at my hands! Imagine what they'll look like at the end of the summer!"

"Here is part of wisdom," Old Kwaku said, and he began to rearrange some okra pods while they were still on their mother plants. He pulled one and nudged another and coaxed a third. He moved this one and that one together and tied the pods together in the shape of a little green person.

"That doesn't look like wisdom to me," the princess said. "Oh, I'm going to go home and die in my father's house, an old maid!"

Elsewhere, Old Kwaku had planted sorghum. He gave the princess a strip of cloth to wave to scare the birds away from the ripening grain.

"This cloth is rough," she said. "When I am married to a rich man, I hope that nothing this coarse will ever touch my skin! I will lie in the shade while other people work, when wisdom has made me into an excellent bride."

"Here is part of wisdom," Old Kwaku told her, and he began to bend this plant gently toward that one and to tie some of the seed heads together. Torso, arms, legs, and head. He tied the sorghum into the shape of a person.

"That doesn't look like wisdom to me," she said. "I hope I start seeing soon what this has to do with wisdom."

In another place, Old Kwaku grew yams. He showed the princess how to clear the weeds and grasses away from the vines, and then he had her dig very carefully to expose some of the tubers without damaging them. He had her pour water from an earthen jar to wash the yams while they were still in the ground.

She stood up and flung mud from her fingers. "Digging in the dirt is no way to learn wisdom! You're taking advantage of me! Show me some wisdom right now!"

"Here is part of wisdom," Old Kwaku said. Gently, he moved the yams without pulling them free. He positioned two to be the arms, two to be the legs, one for the trunk and one for the head. Sure enough, he had put yams together in the shape of a person. He gently pushed the soil back over them.

"That doesn't look like wisdom to me," said the princess. "I should break that water jar over your head!" She stomped off to the river to wash her hands.

When it was time, Old Kwaku harvested the crops, all except for the figures made of okra, sorghum, and yams. He made a great big pot of stew, but he did not taste it and he did not let the princess have any, either. "Soon you'll return to your father, with wisdom or without," he told her. "We'll fast tonight. Beginning tomorrow, let us feast for three days and see whether, at the end, you are wise."

The princess didn't want to fast, but Old Kwaku slept by the pot with the ladle in his hand, like a guard with his spear. So the princess went to bed hungry for the first time in her life. When she woke up, she was very hungry indeed. Old Kwaku was already awake. He had set out three bowls on the mat. The princess knelt down before one, but Old Kwaku said, "We must wait for our guest."

Just then, a tiny voice called out, "I am here for now, but I'm afraid I'm not here for long!"

"Come in, come in," said Old Kwaku. "We were expecting you." He pulled aside the mat that covered his door, and in came a little green person made of okra. Old Kwaku filled the bowls and knelt before one.

As the princess reached for her bowl, the little okra person went to the third bowl and peered inside. "What if it's poisoned?"

The princess looked at her stew. Old Kwaku took a taste from his own bowl and said, "It's not poisoned."

"But how do we know," said the okra person, "that you didn't poison only mine? Or hers?"

"You saw me dish them out."

"Ah, but you're sly," said the okra person. "We weren't watching you carefully. And even if *you* are innocent, a witch might have poisoned it all while you slept."

The princess was very hungry, but now she sat looking at her stew without eating it.

"What do you care if you are poisoned in the morning?" asked Old Kwaku, eating some more of his stew. "You are going to die anyway when the sun goes down."

Why did you have to remind me?" she cried the okra person in a voice so shrill that the princess had to cover her ears. "I don't want to die! Will I suffer? I don't want to be in pain! What is death, anyway? Is it only the beginning of more suffering? Poor me! I am going to a place of torment, I just know it! When will it happen? How high is the sun? How much time is left to me?" The little okra person cried and fretted and cried some more. The princess sat with her hands over her ears all day. Old Kwaku calmly finished his stew, then dumped the untouched servings of the princess and the okra person back into the pot.

When the sun touched the horizon, the okra person ran around in circles, shrieking in terror until it fell down dead. Old Kwaku threw its body into the fire and gave the princess the empty bowls. "Take these to the river and clean them," he said.

"First I want some stew," said the princess.

"No," said Old Kwaku. "Now we must fast until tomorrow. Then we will eat our fill."

The princess took the bowls to the river. She was very, very hungry now. But what if something like this happened again the next day? How could she eat with such a terrible visitor in the hut? What if she starved to death? She brought the clean bowls back and lay down to try to sleep, but she couldn't. She stayed up thinking about herself growing thinner and thinner.

In the morning, Old Kwaku set out three bowls again. The princess was both hungry and tired as she knelt before one. "We must wait for our guest," said Old Kwaku.

From outside, a little voice called, "I'm here for now, and I hope I'll be welcome!"

"Come in, come in," said Old Kwaku. "We were expecting you."

In danced a little brown and white person made of sorghum

seeds Old Kwaku filled three bowls

As the princess reached for her bowl, the sorghum person said, "I hope this has tender meat in it!"

Meat sounded wonderful to the princess. She smiled at the thought.

"It's a vegetable stew," said Old Kwaku He tasted his

"Well I hope it tastes rich. I hope it's as smooth as butter "

The princess held her bowl, thinking of the wonderful taste of butter

It tastes as it tastes," said Old Kwaku, eating some more

The princess was still very, very hungry, but the stew did not seem so appealing, now that she had tender meat and butter on her mind

The sorghum person said, "Well, I hope we'll have something better tomorrow, something meaty and buttery that we can eat every day for the rest of our lives!"

"But you have only this day to live," said Old Kwaku.

"That's true," said the little sorghum person, beginning to dance around. "Oh, I hope I am going to paradise! I hope I have an easy death, and that in the land of the dead there is goat meat cooked in milk. Plantains in honey would be tasty. I'd like to have some roasted beef After I am gone, I hope I won't have to eat ordinary stews. I'll have fish curry with groundnuts!"

The princess forgot that she was holding a bowl of ordinary stew as she watched the little sorghum person dance and listened to it name all the fine things that it would eat in paradise Old Kwaku finished his stew. When the sun touched the horizon, the sorghum person fell over dead, and Old Kwaku threw it onto the fire where it popped and crackled. He took the princess's bowl from her and dumped the stew back in the pot. He did the same with the third serving and sent the princess to the river to wash the empty bowls

As she washed the bowls and brought them back, the princess hoped that tomorrow would be better Hunger gnawed at her when she lay down on her mat. Old Kwaku slept by the pot as before. Perhaps he would fall asleep before she did and she could sneak a taste of stew But weariness overcame even her hunger, and her eyes closed

She awoke to the sound of a little voice shouting, "Let me in! I have no time to waste!" She opened her eyes to see that there were already three servings of stew on the mat. A little purple person made of yams entered the hut and stamped across the floor toward the bowls.

"You call this stew?" it said. "I deserve a better feast than this!"

The princess sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Old Kwaku picked up one of the bowls and began to eat. "It's very good," he said.

"Well, it's not good enough for the likes of me!" insisted the yam person. It tried to overturn one of the bowls, but it wasn't strong enough. "Why are your stupid bowls so heavy?" It kicked the side of the bowl

"Calm down," said Old Kwaku "Life is short."

"I know that life is short!" It kicked the bowl again. "I know it!"

The princess reached for one of the bowls, and the yam person said to Old Kwaku, "Aha! I see that you're up to your old tricks, deceiving girls and making them work your fields Look at her hands!"

The princess looked at her callused hands and stopped reaching for the bowl.

"You got a season's work out of her, and what does she have to show for it? Her body is tired, her belly is empty, and is she wise? She's wise to *you*, maybe! Maybe she's finally catching on, you old fraud!"

The princess closed her hands into fists. She looked at Old Kwaku, who calmly ate his stew. She trembled. "It's true!" she said. "You're nothing but a cheat! I did everything you told me to do, and am I wise?" She seized one of the bowls.

"Oh, I hope I am going to paradise! I hope I have an easy death, and that in the land of the dead there is goat meat cooked in milk. Plantains in honey would be tasty."

"You are hungry," said Old Kwaku. "Have some stew "

"I'll give you stew!" she shouted. She hurled the bowl to the floor She picked up the other bowl and broke that one as well.

You promised wisdom and gave me only grief! If I were a man, I would kill you!" On her way out, she tore the mat from the doorway and flung it to the ground.

"Are you going to let her talk to you like that?" the yam person demanded

Old Kwaku went on eating

"Those were good bowls!" said the yam person. "How dare she break those bowls!"

When he had eaten his fill, Old Kwaku cleaned up the mess of stew and broken pottery

"Look! She didn't just rip your mat from the doorway! She tore the mat itself! Your best mat! Why aren't you getting mad? You let her walk all over you! I could just strangle you for being so soft!"

Using some reeds, Old Kwaku mended and rehung the mat When the sun touched the horizon, the little yam person stamped on the ground, screamed with fury, and died Old Kwaku threw what was left of him onto the fire.

Now the next summer, when the third princess came to visit, it was an altogether different story ❧

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In the Forest of Forgetting

She stood at the edge of the forest. She knew it was the edge because behind her the path disappeared into undergrowth. She could see rhododendrons covered with flowers like cotton candy. There were bushes without flowers, which she could not name: *shrubus leafiana*. Ahead of her, the path was shadowed by oaks, poplars, maples with leaves like Canadian flags. In the shadow of the trees, the air was cool and smelled of toothpaste.

"Welcome," said the Witch. She was standing beneath an oak tree whose branches were covered with green acorns. The Witch was wearing a white coat. Around her neck was a silver chain with a silver disk hanging from it. Just what a Witch should look like, she thought. It was comforting when things looked as they should. The forest, for instance.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"In the Forest of Forgetting," said the Witch. "Hence the forgetting. Let me check your heart."

"Why am I here?"

The Witch placed the silver disk on her chest. It felt cold against her bare skin. "Heart normal. You're here because you have lumps."

She looked down at her chest, where the silver disk had been placed. There they were, the only lumps she could see, above the slight bulge of her stomach.

"What's wrong with them?" They were small and a bit crooked, but they looked all right.

The Witch put her hands in her pockets. "Your lumps have metastasized. They must be removed."

"Well," she said. And again, "Well." Even in the stillness under the trees, which made her feel calm and a bit sleepy, this seemed unnecessarily repetitive. "How—"

HARD AS WE MIGHT WORK TO REMEMBER, SOMETIMES IT'S EASIER TO JUST LET IT ALL GO.

BY THEODORA GOSS ILLUSTRATION BY LORI KOFFOED

With this," said the Witch, pulling a silver wand from one pocket. It looked harmless enough. The Witch muttered something under her breath and waved her wand.

Before she had time to close her eyes or prepare herself for whatever might happen, two moths rose from her chest, white with flecks of gray on their wings They fluttered along the path, looping and twisting around one another, as though making invisible macrame

She looked down at her chest. The lumps were gone

"That went quite well," said the Witch, replacing the wand in her pocket

The moths fluttered upward, spiraling into the treetops until she could no longer see them. The clouds overhead were white and fluffy, like sheep No, she thought Like pillows, like unrolled toilet paper left in heaps on the floor She liked creating unusual similes

"Don't go too far into the forest," said the Witch "You'll have to come back, eventually " The Witch began walking toward the rhododendrons and nameless bushes

"Wait," she said. Something had been bothering her She had almost forgotten it, watching the moths rise upward "What is my name?"

The Witch turned back for a moment Her silver disk winked in the shifting light under the trees "Your name is Patient."

She looked down at the path her feet were bare and her toenails needed clipping That didn't sound right at all. She wasn't particularly patient, was in fact generally impatient She looked up, wanting to ask the Witch if she were certain, but the Witch was gone

There was nothing to do but go farther into the forest. It was silent, except for the occasional rustle high among the treetops

When she heard laughter, she looked up In the branches of a laurel, spiders had woven their webs, like a giant game of cat's cradle They were brown, and about the size of her hand.

"What sort of web? What web? What web?" The words came down to her in clacking sing-song, as though she were being questioned by a collection of sewing machines. One spider spun itself down from a branch and hung by its thread in front of her. "What web?" It went into paroxysms of laughter, shaking on its thread like a brown yo-yo.

She looked around her, trying to see what the spiders were laughing about, and saw that the path behind her was littered with brown string. She knelt down, picked up a handful, and suddenly realized what she was holding

"Not a web," she said to the spiders. "My hair See?" She put her hand on her head. It was bare. Her arms and legs were bare. Even the place under her belly was bare. "It's fallen out. I won't have to buy shampoo or disposable razors." She said this to show it was probably for the best. Perhaps they believed her, because their laughter stopped and the dangling spider rose again to his branch. But she sat on the path and cried, wiping her eyes with a handful of hair

When she was finished, she blew her nose on an oak leaf and went on. It was no use, she told herself, crying over spilt hair. Perhaps she would grow a winter coat Perhaps it would come in white, like an arctic hare's

She was so focused on planning for winter when her coat would come in and she would live on acorns, that she almost tripped over the coffin

"Be careful," said the first Apprentice He was dressed in a blue coat, and wore a blue showercap on his head Around his neck was a silver chain, with a silver disk hanging from it.

"You'll trip over the Queen," said the second Apprentice, who was dressed just like him.

"If you tripped, she would blame us," said the third Apprentice Her showercap was pushed back to show her bangs

"Who?" she asked. "The Queen?" The Queen looked incapable of blaming anybody.

"The Witch We're her Apprentices," said the Apprentices together "Obviously," muttered the third Apprentice

She wondered if they had practiced beforehand

"Let us check your heart," said the first Apprentice. All three came together and put their silver disks on her chest.

"Heart normal "

"Too slow."

"Too fast "

They glared at each other and began arguing among themselves

She looked down at the Queen. The glass of the coffin was perfectly clear Through it she could see the Queen's robe, a deep blue, and her blue turban. Her face was a little blue as well

"She died of lumps," said the Apprentices

"They metastasized "

"The Witch could not remove them in time "

"Magic is much more advanced, nowadays."

She put her hands on the coffin and, not knowing what else to do, tapped her fingers on the glass. Her cuticles were ragged What would the Queen think?

"She left you gifts " said the Apprentices

"A dress " It was made of paper, and tied in back She could not reach the strings, so the first Apprentice tied it for her. She had never liked floral patterns, she thought, looking down at herself. But it would have to do until her winter coat came in

"A mirror." The second Apprentice held it for her. She realized, with surprise, that she had no eyebrows She should have expected that It made her look surprised, which seemed appropriate

The third Apprentice smiled and said, "You look a little like her, only not so blue."

She did, indeed, look a little like the Queen. "Thank you," she said. The Queen approved of politeness "Did she, by any chance, leave me a name?" She did not want to seem ungrateful, but this was, after all, important to her. You needed a name, if someone was going to, for example ask you to lunch. She had not eaten since breakfast, and she was beginning to feel hungry

"Your name is Daughter," they said. "Now it's time to turn back."

"Why?" Surely she was too old for a name like Daughter.

They looked at each other, then muttered among themselves "Because," they said decisively

She frowned, wondering what it looked like without eyebrows, wondering if she should look in the mirror again to find out. Instead, she turned and walked farther along the path, deeper into the forest.

"Wait" they shouted behind her

"You're going too far!"

"Your heart can't take it!"

"Do you want to end up like the Queen?"

Eventually, it was silent again

The forest began to grow darker Maples and poplars were replaced by pines. Needles prickled her feet as she walked on the path. She tried to eat a pinecone, but it left her hands sticky and tasted like gasoline. Not that she had tasted gasoline, but she imagined it would taste exactly like that. If she could wash her hands in the river

"No one may cross the river," said the Knight

"I don't want to cross. I just want to wash my hands and have a drink "

"No," said the Knight. Above the knees, he was dressed in a suit of armor Below, he wore a pair of galoshes. "Ouyay aymay otnay inkdray oray ashway Onay Oneway." He lifted his visor. His mustache looked like it had been cut with nail clippers It was turning gray

"Why?" It was the question she had been asking since she entered the forest

The Knight looked puzzled. "I don't know I think it's a rule or something." He had a nice voice The Witch and her Apprentices had sounded like subway conductors And the Queen hadn't spoken at all. "I think you're supposed to go back "

"That's just it," she said "Who is you? I mean, who is me?" She sounded impatient, and she realized that she must be hungry, tired,

impatient. No one in this forest answered questions directly. Would anyone tell her what she wanted to know?

"Well," he said. He tugged at his mustache, although his armored hands were clumsy. "You like blackberry pie. You overwater house plants, feed stray cats on the back porch, sleep through your alarm clock." He began counting on his fingers. It must help him remember, she thought. "You write stories for children. *A Camembert Moon, Priscilla's Flying Pig, The Train to Nouberton.* You complain about your knees, and you hate wearing glasses. Once, you went on a diet where you ate nothing but cucumbers for a week. You can't mend socks, play tennis, or sing. You hate scrubbing toilets." He reached ten and looked at her, fingers outspread. "How am I doing?"

"Well," she said. She did like blackberry pie, although she didn't need glasses. Her eyesight was perfectly clear. She could see, for instance, that the Knight had wrinkles under his eyes. They made him look rather handsome. "But what is my name?"

lace poppies, cornflowers. And beyond the meadow—

"Are you going to the mountains?" asked the Princess. She wore pajamas with feet and a necklace of paperclips.

Was she? They were blue with pines, and probably farther away than they appeared.

"Look at what I have," said the Princess. She was holding a wicker cage. In it were two moths, white with gray markings on their wings.

"I wondered where they had gone," she said. She was sorry, now, to have lost them. They were pretty, like sheets of newspaper turned into kites.

"I'll give them water in the teacups my dolls use. Do you know my dolls?"

"No," she said. It was an important question: was she going to the mountains?

"Their names are Octavia, because she only has eight toes, and

She put her hand on her head. It was bare. Her arms and legs were bare. Even the place under her belly was bare.

"I think," said the Knight, looking at his fingers as though trying to remember. "I think your name is Wife."

It was a nice name, whispery, like "wish" and "whinny" and "willow." It was the nicest name she had heard so far. But it wasn't quite right.

"I'm sorry," she said, because she knight was looking at her with an anxious smile. She stepped into the river.

"Wait" said the Knight.

The river was cold and clear and shallow. Although there were stepping stones, she walked on the muddy bottom, letting the water curl around her ankles, then around her knees. In the middle of the river, she bent down to wash her hands and frightened a brown fish under a rock. Once her hands were no longer sticky, she drank from them and splashed water on her face, scattering drops of water on her paper dress.

"Won't you reconsider?" shouted the Knight. He was standing in the water, up to the buckles of his galoshes. She wondered if he would follow her into the river, but he did not. Perhaps, she thought, he was afraid that his armor would rust. Instead, he stood near the riverbank, arms held out like an airplane. He was standing there each time she turned back to look. Finally, the path bent and she could no longer see him.

Once, a family of squirrels scrambled down from an oak tree and asked for her autograph. The squirrel children had copies of *A Camembert Moon*. When she told them she had no pen, they brought her berries. She signed each one "With regards, Author." She wondered where they kept books, whether there were shelves in the oak tree. When she had signed copies for Jumpy, Squirmy, Tailless, Nuthunter, and Squawk, they shared their dinner with her: an acorn mash that would have made a good meal, if she had been a squirrel. She was still hungry, although less hungry than before.

Finally, the trees grew farther apart. She saw undergrowth, including a bush with berries. They looked like the berries the squirrels had used for ink. She wondered if they were safe to eat, and thought of trying a few. Surely if they were poisonous she would feel sick or throw up. A few would not kill her. But she was too nervous to try.

The trees ended at the edge of a meadow filled with Queen Anne's

Puddle. Because you know." The Princess raised her hand to her mouth, as though speaking through a trumpet. "She's just a baby."

"Do you like making dresses for your dolls?" she asked the Princess.

"Yes," said the Princess. "I make them from leaves and toilet paper."

"If you help me untie it," she said, "you can have my dress." It had been itching for some time, and anyway she would not need it in the mountains. When the strings were untied, she slipped the dress off and handed it to the Princess.

Someone was moving in the meadow, someone in a blue coat, with a blue showercap on his head. He was holding an enormous butterfly net. And another someone, and another.

"We'll catch her!" shouted the Apprentices, jumping and turning as though chasing enormous butterflies.

"She shouldn't have crossed the river!"

"Her heart can't take the strain."

"But we'll catch her here, never worry!"

Had she made her final decision? Was she going to the mountains? The Apprentices began stalking away from each other, like detectives.

"You're good at names, aren't you?" she said to the Princess.

The Princess nodded. "I once named 17 caterpillars. They were named One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and so on, up to Seventeen."

"What would you name me?" Every few minutes, one Apprentice would run up to another, shouting "Boo!" and making the other jump. The mountains looked mysterious and inviting.

The Princess considered. "I think I would name you Mother."

"An excellent name." But not her name, not quite. She would find her name in the mountains. It would be unexpected and inevitable, a name she could never have imagined, like Rumpelstiltskin. In the mountains she would learn about berries. Her winter coat would come in.

She leaned down and kissed the Princess, then put one hand on the wicker cage. "Goodbye," she said. "Take good care of them. I think they once belonged to the Queen."

She stepped into the sunlight. It was warm on her body. Bees circled around her, visiting the Queen Anne's lace. The Apprentices were stalking away from each other, butterfly nets raised and fluttering in the breeze. She hoped they would not notice her.

She held out her hands so they brushed the tops of the grasses, and started across the meadow.

THE DOOR GUNNER

THERE ARE PLACES IN HELL EVEN CHARON WON'T GO, SO SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO MAKE THE TRIP YOURSELF.

SERGEANT Pennington ■ D.G. reeks of decay. He sweats from his greasy pores the fully-turning stench of a corpse in the sun.

I always cringe to see D.G. in the door of a Huey slipping down into the rotor-whipped elephant grass to yank me and my fellow Lurps out of the field, but I gulp back my disgust and drill like a sonuvabitch to reach the chopper and soon crowd inside. No Lurp has ever died on one of D.G.'s extractions, and sitting in his keen over-ripeness all the way back to camp has it all over lying facedown in a wedge of triple-canopy jungle giving off that stink yourself.

D.G. does his job. He, his crew chiefs, and the pilot he rides with—different chiefs at different times, but the same pilot—always get you home. The chiefs defer to his uncanny sense of which door *he* needs to roan. Granted, you hate to see him empty-eyed and lean under an olive-drab helmet, LOVE BONG JOE stenciled on it in Day-Glo orange, 'cause he first-out spooks you. But you also rejoice, for it means you and your buddies will live. You'll return to Indian Country—to befuddle Charlie or to lay him waste—and D.G., no matter who he partners with, is the only blessed chopper guard who *guarantees* that return.

Your survival depends on the rank, ugly dude. Our whirlwind dips and stitches over the sultry countryside. Inside it, you can eyeball D.G. all you want. He never leaves his pocket, a skinny guy with his boots swallowing his legs like hungry mudcats from the muck of Perfume River. He seldom glances at the jittery locks he's just helped save, but peers down with a knife-slit mouth at the seesawing earth, nursing a contempt that's hard to tell from boredom. The nametag on his fatigues says EXLEY. What else would it say? SLAUGHTER? SKELTON? DeFUNIS?

By Michael Bishop
Illustration by Dave Lebi

"Thanks, D.G.," says Carlson, our radioman. "God bless your stinkin hide." He has to yell—over the rotors, over the *pop-pop-pop* of gunfire—but everybody hears him, and D.G. grins a big grin. Rather than talk, he lets flow a storm of deadness from every cut and pore—so that even in our flying wind tunnel the stink of his mortality settles on us six Lurps and the Huey's crew chief like river fog.

"Christ!" Greene cries. "Cut us some slack."

Instead of the cheese," Fearless says.

Without looking at us, D.G. takes off his helmet—what's he need a helmet for, anyway?—and sweeps his straw-colored bangs aside with a meaty, gray hand. Above and to the left of his nose, a third eye appears. It doesn't engage us, either. It's a bullet hole, not an organ of sight, and it gives D.G. the wigged-out serenity of a Buddha on drugs. It also gives him ... immunity.

The Huey hurdles. D.G.'s stench inversifies, then dissolves. I look at Carlson, Greene, Fearless, Stonecroft, and Rodriguez. D.G. has saved our asses. He'll keep us safe until we land at Camp Eagle and he wanders off to monitor incoming NVA rockets while the guys and I retreat to Lurpland to debrief and bend our elbows.

Once he's got you home, you probably won't see D.G. again—until, out in the boonies, you sprawl in dire peril of extinction, his third eye triangulating and his aura of crazy detachitude spinning its magic.

D.G. frets and calms us, disgusts and animates us. Greene calls him a fucking zombie, often to his blank, gray mug, but everyone else calls him D.G., as if saying any syllable of his name—of either Joe or Exley—would hoodoo the whole company. As if reminding him of his past as a breathing, eating, eliminating, love-making human animal would revoke the miracle of his inhuman hanging-on.

EXLEY

CORPORAL FEARING

D.G. and I had zilch in common but Georgia and the goddamned war. I mean, I prowl the Beyond with the Lurps, he flew door gunner on the slicks *whop-whopping* in to tractor us out. I dig Cream and Iron Butterfly, he got off on Johnny Cash. I'm a lapsed Savannah-bred Catholic, he was a practicing Valdosta-reared Baptist. I smash Carling cans—tin, not aluminum—on my forehead, he stacked them up like pyramids. I have a nose like a champion bluetick, and he—nowadays, anyway—has the aroma of a goat and no clue how high he stinks.

Don't get me wrong. D.G. pulls his weight as a gunner. But back in camp—thank God, Shiva, or the Great Cosmic Maw—he shuffles around like a hundred-year-old hobo. If he veers your way, you cross the duckboard to keep from having to nod, much less brush his shoulder.

Some numbnuts call him Lurch or Herman Munster, but not to his face. That goes for me, too. Chet "Fearless" Fearing, top point walker in the Lurp brotherhood. K-bar none. Close up, the death smell pouring off D.G. floods your senses. You gag or retch. You scurry away to keep from shaming yourself. On his last mission before his DEROS (designated return from overseas), you see, the poor guy took a sniper's bullet to the forehead and slumped backward into his Huey, dead.

By that time, over months of boone-humping, I'd served a full tour in the Lurps and reupped for another, and I'd *earned* my nickname. (I can scarcely remember my cherry days when Old Foul Dudes like Pennington and Roquemore called me Tremble-und-Fearing. "Hey, Tremble-und-Fearing, get your ass over here!" Nobody uses that handle for me anymore, though. Everybody knows better.)

But when I saw D.G. walking in full combat gear the day after Mr. Stuckl flew him back to Camp Eagle dead, I nearly let go a stink as putrid as any that'll ever blow from him. I clutched my belly and bent over like a coze with the cramps. I thought I'd hitchhiked the black-light arrow around the bend. I even considered talking to the RC chaplain, Captain Urbanec, about my spiritual condition.

But, hey, Camp Eagle teems with smells—diesel fuel burning shit in rusty metal drums, damp canvas steaming, mangoes and bananas rotting in a rocketed supply truck. And as a Lurp, you get the deep tropical funk of a hootchful of dudes in sweat-soaked cammies—crotch rot, jungle foot, camouflage grease, halazone-tablet halitosis, spent fear, the lingering stench of our dreams in the Conghaunted Beyond.

But D.G. coming at you after buying it in Mr. Stuckl's chopper—damn, he's a marching one man graveyard. And I—I'm baptized Fearless—I step into somebody's tent, cover my nose with a bandanna, and pray that he'll shuffle on by. He has the run—the gimpy walk—of the camp. Who's going to grab the sloppy scruff of his neck and tell him to park his zombie self in a body bag?

Yesterday, I decided that maybe *I* have to.

MIKE LAMONICA, UPI

I met the whacked-out door gunner *before* his apotheosis into a Vietnam legend. In my opinion, a bogus Vietnam legend.

No one hates the press like arrogant command-grade officers who accuse you of sabotaging the war effort if you mention a shortage of *shower soap*. But enlisted men and field-grade officers, guys who'll pass you their flak jackets in a firefight, also like to test your mettle.

I fly into Phu Bai on a C-130 out of Cam Ranh Bay. An Afro-sporting sergeant named Stonecroft, a Lurp from J Company, tells me I need to write a story about Sp4 Joe Exley, a dead helicopter gunner still flying missions. Obviously, the flimflam—the media machinery of the Army's biggest pranksters—has cranked into high gear.

"I ain't kidding," Stonecroft says, steering our jeep along a road between rice paddies. "D.G.'s dead but too dumb to lie down."

"You must think I just washed up on China Beach." (That too-dumb-to-lie-down line has kept the chuckleheads chuckling since World War II.)

"I ain't bullshitting you. You should interview him. Buy me a cold one and I'll take you to him."

The smells of decaying fish and sun-warmed water mingle with the rank aromas drifting toward us from Camp Eagle.

About a year ago, I saw Exley in a chopper in action over a village suspected of harboring Viet Cong officers and supplies. He trained hellfire from his M-60 into the thatched roofs and along a road over which some peasants and half-naked children fled. Most of these people fell under his barrage. Then the Huey swung about so that Exley could chatter out the coup de grâce.

Afterward, in a plywood canteen near the helicopter pads, I talked to him. "It's hard to tell the good guys from the bad over here, but, still, how can you shoot women and kids?"

Exley took a sip of beer. "Easy—you just don't lead 'em so much." Then he told me about shoving VC collaborators out of choppers after they'd refused to cooperate with allied interrogators. In fact, in this way, he'd posted at least three or four dinks to their well-deserved demises. Later, I filed his "you-just-don't-lead-'em-so-much" remark in an article about the aimless barbarism of some of our operations, without attributing it to Exley by name, and it gained notoriety throughout all the U.S. forces in Vietnam.

Now, Luther "Panther Eyes" Stonecroft wants me to sit down with Exley again, on the dubious assertion that he has kept on serving his country *as a dead man*. So I let Stonecroft deliver me to him. The product of shameless Grand Guignol makeup, Exley squats in a test-fire pit near the perimeter. We have to meet outside, Panther Eyes says, because only a few can abide D.G. indoors—usually just the Lurps whom he's flown in to rescue. (His stench they understand; somehow prevents theirs.)

At twilight, I hunker five or six feet from Exley, hating myself for surrendering to all this hocus-pocus. He declines to brush away the flies landing on his face and arms. He ignores them, even when they crawl into his mouth or over his filmy eyes. Yoga, I tell myself. A mental discipline that will reward him big time when his ruse suckers me and I declare it authentic in print—Exley's payback for my splashing around his offhand brag about his marksmanship.

"You hung your fatigues downwind from a dead water buffalo," I say. "You used a grease stick to get your skin that bloodless gray. You had a friend paint the hole on your forehead."

"Put your finger in it," Exley says. His voice has a breathy husk. If I moved a few feet off, I couldn't hear it. His invitation doesn't tempt me, though. It has accused me, subtly, of impiety.

Exley pushes his bangs aside. Flies lift and circle—heavily, as if sated. "Put your finger in it." I walk toward him, feeling tipsy, almost sick. I touch my finger to the edge of his "wound." Exley grunts, a wordless *Put your finger in the hole*. I obey.

"Deeper," he says.

I insert my finger to the second knuckle, reaching a psychic barrier that stops my probing. Exley's mismatched eyes make him look like a big human gecko. I pull my finger out and back away until I've escaped the pit and the awe-creating dispassion of his stare.

CAPTAIN DICKMAN

Shortly after noon, Sp4 Exley barges into my paymaster's Quonset. Corporal Leslie and my other brave clerk-typist call my name and retreat into the road. I stride to the inner doorway and cover my nose with my arm. I don't bolt, though. I ask D.G. what he wants. When he speaks, his voice seems to work in reverse from yours or mine. His sentences don't come out backward, but he sucks in rather than expels air to make sounds. He tells me he wants his pay, and his voice vacuums some of the stink that he's brought in with him back into the loose sack of his body. I lower my arm and study him with honest-to-God perplexity.

I didn't like him before. I don't like him now. Usually, the least strac guys in the 101st show up as Lurps, but D.G. outdoes them all.

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Sherwood Smith
Charles de Lint
Fire Bringer
Growing Wings
Sight
Nancy Springer
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Robin McKinley
Spindle's End
Brian Jacques
Redwall
Robin McKinley
The Outlaws of Sherwood

Although the recent resurgence of interest in fantasy—as seen with the success of the Harry Potter books and the film version of *Lord of the Rings*—has brought the genre into the public eye in a big way, there have always been terrific fantasy novels and devoted readers. It is writing that transports both its author and its audience into another world, with remarkable heroes and heroines, heartstopping conflicts, and inventive magic.

Firebird titles are not any one particular kind of fantasy. There are books set in "our" world; those full of sword and sorcery in other worlds; humorous novels; animal epics; and those set far in the future, on other planets. No matter what sort of book you choose for yourself, your classroom or a reading group, you'll find that there is much to discuss. I've provided some general questions to get you started—tailor them as you see fit. And have a wonderful time!

Sharyn November
Editor
Firebird

Start a Firebird reading group!

1. What defines a title as a "fantasy" or "science fiction" book?
2. Fantasy novels are frequently divided by genre—"high" and "low" fantasy. High fantasy is set in a world other than our own, and characterized by sword and sorcery. Low fantasy is based in our world, and turns on the device of everyday things imbued with magic. How would you classify the book you're reading? Why?
3. Often, fantasy novels contain an object or objects that are considered symbols of power, or are set in a place that is a nexus of power. Where are those things, or this place, in the book being discussed?
4. Many fantasy novels descend from the tradition of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or folk and fairy tales, or some country's native mythology. What is the case in this book? Is there more than one source?
5. [illegible] maps? Why or why not?
6. A number of fantasy novels feature an animal rather than a human society. How does this make the book different? Does it allow the writer to take more chances or fewer? Do you consider the books more or less believable?
7. Fantasy and science fiction novels generally follow a hero's journey. What characteristics define a hero? Does the character in this book live up to these characteristics or fall short?
8. Do any of the books seem to have an "invented" mythology, universe, or belief system?—in other words, they may draw from certain sources, but still seem wholly original. What makes them original?
9. Do you think that comedy is an essential part of the fantasy genre? Do you think it is easier or harder to incorporate than tragedy? Are there certain Firebird books that are more comedic than others?
10. In your opinion, what does an author need to have in order to write a good fantasy novel? Are there skills more crucial for a fantasy author to have than authors of other genres? What techniques and talents do fantasy/science fiction authors have in common with traditional fiction authors?

Other Books from FIREBIRD

The Changeling Sea
Patricia A. McKillip

Crown Duel
Sherwood Smith

The Dreaming Place
Charles de Lint

The Ear, the Eye and the Arm
Nancy Farmer

Enchantress from the Stars
Sylvia Engdahl
Introduction by Lois Lowry

Fire Bringer
David Clement-Davies

Growing Wings
Laurel Winter

The Hex Witch of Seldom
Nancy Springer

I Am Mordred: A Tale from Camelot
Nancy Springer

I Am Morgan le Fay:
A Tale from Camelot
Nancy Springer

Mariel of Redwall: A Tale from Redwall
Brian Jacques

Mattimeo: A Tale from Redwall
Brian Jacques

Mossflower: A Tale from Redwall
Brian Jacques

The Outlaws of Sherwood
Robin McKinley

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The Riddle of the Wren
Charles de Lint

Spindle's End
Robin McKinley

Treasure at the Heart of the Tanglewood
Meredith Ann Pierce

The Winter Prince
Elizabeth E. Wein

The Westmark Trilogy by Lloyd Alexander
The Beggar Queen
The Kestrel
Westmark

The Firebringer Trilogy by Meredith Ann Pierce
Birth of the Firebringer
Dark Moon
The Son of Summer Stars

Castaways of the Flying Dutchman
Brian Jacques

The Kin
David Clement-Davies

The Sight
Peter Dickinson

Future Reading... Coming this Fall

Firebirds: An Anthology of Original Fantasy and Science Fiction
Edited by Sharyn November

Salamandastron:
A Tale from Redwall
Brian Jacques

Taggerung:
A Tale from Redwall
Brian Jacques

The Beguilers
Kate Thompson

Wolf Queen:
The Claidi Journals #3
Tanith Lee

The Door in the Hedge
Robin McKinley

The Secret Country Trilogy
Pamela Dean
The Secret Country
The Hidden Land
The Whim of the Dragon

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From the start he dressed like a pirate He got away with it because he could shoot and never quavered in the air That's what Major Burke says, who swears D.G. had a banner in his hootch—DOOR GUNNERS DO IT FOR FUN—and target cutouts of Charlie on the wall. The cutouts had overlapping bullet holes in their hearts

D G returned from his last official mission dead Graves Registration wrote him up, Personnel recorded it, and his name went to MACV. Then the bastard got up and put himself back on duty. He's become Chief Warrant Officer Stickl's favorite door gunner. Stickl doesn't care who else you assign to him as a gunner, so long as the pair includes D.G. Stickl has ferried so many otherwise doomed Lurps home, dusting them off in the hairiest of circumstances, that you can't deny him his gunner of choice. So Major Burke, Stickl's CO, gave him D.G., and Stickl's rate of pickups without death or injury, always pretty good before, has soared.

I changed paperwork listing D G as KIA (Killed In Action) to indicate a mixup in the field Major Burke told me to send his pay to a southeast Georgia nursing facility caring for D G 's mother She was a paraplegic, the only surviving member of a nasty car wreck during his training at Fort Benning A dead man, even one still on duty, would surely rather keep his coma-ridden mama alive than squander his pay on useless food and drink, Major Burke said

Lots of Lurps talk back But so will jerks in other units if they've seen combat and lived to tell of it. If you're a desk jockey, only the threat of a stretch in Long Binh jail can keep their attitudes in check. But what incentive does a walking corpse have to respect you? He's already suffered worse than what you or the Code of Military Justice can mete out A dead GI has shuffled off not only his mortal coil but the whole ever shaking chain of command

"D.G., what do you want your pay for?"

"For doing my duty," he says in his painful in gulping way "For saving the sorry asses of J Company cowboys over and over again."

"What do you plan to *do* with it? You don't eat, booze, read, or buy new clothes anymore."

Lizard-faced, he stares at me. "What would be the point?"

"Exactly Don t you want your pay to keep going to your mother's life-support maintenance?"

D G says nothing

"Nobody here's swindling you," I tell him. "You're dead, D G , but Uncle Sam keeps paying you through me " I spread my arms, but hur riedly drop them. What if he stepped forward and tried to hug me?

D.G looks at me as if he's just pushed a dead half-track across 10 hectares of Indian Country. He sucks in air. He puts a moist, gray hand on Corporal Leslie's desk and growls that he doesn't give a fuck what happens to his mama—she's luckier than some he knows of. If I can't see the justice in giving him all his pay, maybe my better angel—he *says* "better angel"—could spring for an allowance

"Allowance? What do you mean, allowance?"

"Put your wallet on the desk " His hand makes a greasy print on the blotter when he pounds it, hard. "Now, Dickhead!"

"*Dickman*," I say. "*Captain* Dickman to you, soldier."

"Now!" He pounds harder

I fear that a part of his hand—its heel or a finger—may fly off. I lay my wallet on the desk. He cracks it open and seizes some scrip, two $20 bills, and a creased photo of my wife Patti

"Leave that," I say

"No." The air conditioning feels really cold. "Make up what I've taken out of my next nursing-home payment."

"All right But what if they try to evict your mother? What if -?"

"What if she *dies*?" D.G. says. "I don't know, Dickhead. I hope she can, all the goddamned way." And he leaves, thank God.

After that visit, I send him money every other week or so by Corporal Leslie, who eventually files a 1049 requesting transfer to a combat unit

D.G 's mother dies—all the way, I suppose—but I don't halt his payouts to her nursing home until its director notifies us. Morons who pun on my name warrant nothing but contempt. As for D.G., may he soon die his longed-for second death

MISS BU'Ó'UM

He comes to Huê by himself, walking Most GIs arrive together in a jeep, settle on a price with Madame Vinh, and then come in to pick their girls and take them to rooms. It's good money and sometimes fun. Lucky girls get GIs with quick triggers, guys who finish in three minutes, with no time to reload They've got other bars to visit, fistfights to start, and maybe prawns to cook on the beach near Phu Bai What we do for money, though, is better than scrubbing clothes on a rock

No other girl wants this GI, no matter what he pays He has a crooked face and a smell like he rolled on a dead dog cooking in the sun He looks dead, or very tired, a sort of grownup orphan I feel sorry for him, but not sorry enough, at first, to lead his skinny body to my room

Madame Vinh says to him, "If you bathe in sea and come back smelling better, my girls will like you more "

He laughs at her in his rough, queer voice He shows U.S scrip and brand-new dollars

Madame Vinh shakes her head, protecting every girl in the old brick building where we keep house She does not budge on this Some girls have *fathers* who would sell them faster than Madame Vinh.

"For one hour's talk and nothing more " The ugly GI waves his money

Madame Vinh stands before him in a purple *ao dai*, like a brave mouse defying a hungry bear

"I'll take him," I say "For one hour's talk and nothing more "

To the other girls' great surprise, the skinny fella and I retreat to my chamber I dip my handkerchief in perfume—just one drop—and hold it beside my nose, not like a mountain bandit but like a high bred Saigon lady in a smart café. There's no need to smell him up close, but no need to hurt his feelings, either A well-trained courtesan has delicacy, which I learned from watching overseas movies, *not* from listening to women talk at Madame Vinh's. So I wait.

Sitting on my bed, he doesn't make hungry eyes. He doesn't talk Maybe he will grab me like a bread stick and crack my spine. I hold my handkerchief down to see him better and ask him what he likes to talk about

When he still doesn't speak, I say, "Why do you *only* want to talk? Were you shot? Do you have bad combat stress?"

"Something like that."

I wait. I wait a scary, long time.

Finally he says, "There's an island where my government sends men who are too sick to return to the States—an island in the South China Sea. The soldiers who go there have Black Syphilis."

"Do *you* have this sickness?"

"No I'm one very clean dead boy, Miss "

Black syphilis—I can hardly say it—sounds bad, worse than leprosy or cancer or maybe even leprosy and cancer together.

"You ever heard of such a place?" His voice sounds like a cello played deep and wrong in a bad Hollywood movie. My room feels empty of living air.

I say, "This island comes from GIs' heads only. It does not exist. GIs like to scare other GIs It's a game you play But if you are VD-free—I don't sleep with sick fellas—stop worrying and have some fun." Maybe I should do it. This Exley man has no rhythm and very bad blues. He needs no-stress boom-boom with Miss Bu'ô'um. "My name," I say, "means butterfly " This news often leads to happy talk or cuddles. "My name comes from—"

He interrupts, "I need to find that island."

"Why?"

"It sounds like a cross between Tahiti and hell. The dead belong in hell "

"Not if they die sanctified," I say.

"My God, a Catholic book B-girl. I didn't die sanctified. I died with

blasphemy on my lips and my M-60 rockin n rollin. I *belong* in hell, hopefully one with a beach."

I think of how a great-uncle on my mother's side of our family drove to Saigon a few years ago, poured gasoline on his body, and set himself afire to protest the repressive Diems. "Maybe Vietnam is such a place."

Small lights jump in my visitor's eyes. "Minus the gooks and grunts, it'd be a helluva country, Vietnam. Scratch that—it'd be *paradise*."

"You feeling better? You like some fun now?" I hear traffic in the streets, jeep doors slamming, and gruff American voices in the parlor.

He stands. "I'd only seed you with death. Six months from now, you'd bear one stullborn freak that looked like you and another just like me." His swallowing laughter makes another fat hole in my air.

I hold my perfumed handkerchief to my face. Standing, he rolls his back from one wall to the next, leaving damp spots on the plaster. He shows me his bullet hole. Says that he has wasted my time. Throws scrip and money on my cot and, by accident, a picture of a pale woman with short yellow hair. Her hair clings to her face like wings. I pick up the photo.

"Your sweetheart?"

"My wife. I shouldn't be here. I'm breaking my vows."

"She'll forgive you," I say. "*If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with.*' Wise GI saying."

Wise GI saying does its work. Match flares jump again in his eyes, and he comes to me almost dancing. I turn the photo over on my cot. I veil my mouth and nose with the handkerchief. He clutches my arms with his damp hands and touches his lips to my forehead. I feel faint, but not from the fancies of a woman in a love story by Stendhal or Tolstoy.

The door to my room bangs open. The GI named Chet Fearing, who thinks he loves me, barges in. "Take your filthy hands off her, D.G.!" He grabs Exley just as Exley grabbed me. Then he flings Exley into the hall. The door gunner shrugs his loose shoulders and stares back in with flat, dead eyes.

"You have no business entertaining this man," Corporal Chet says.

"You think I have no business 'entertaining' anyone but you. If I listen to you, I starve."

He shakes his head. "No time to jaw, Miss Bu'ô'um." He goes out and grabs the stink-heavy GI, to drive him back to Camp Eagle.

"Don't forget your wife." I stick the photo of the yellow-haired woman into the hall and shake it at him.

Corporal Chet takes it and examines it closely. "I didn't know you were married, D.G." He slips the picture into the other's shirt pocket. Then he tugs on this man's arm and pulls him to the stairs.

After they leave, I go down to an alley and throw up on the cobbles. I throw up a spoonful of black stuff, only. Then I dab my lips with my handkerchief and go back into the parlor to wait for evening.

CORPORAL FEARING

When I shove D.G. into the jeep with Cockroach Greene and Panther Eyes Stonecroft, they pile out. They say they'll catch a ride back to camp with somebody else. I call them pussies and make that jeep jump out of Hué like a racehorse from a starting gate. I came to see Miss Bu'ô'um, but finding D.G. with her, even if they were dressed and upright, gave me the kick in the pants I needed to tell D.G. to stop hanging on, to haul his carcass to Graves Registration and lie down in one of those aluminum coffins that MACV sends our dead home in. Then he'll rest in peace back in Valdosta with his mama and the other putrefying Exleys.

"Why would somebody still walking lie down in a coffin?" D.G. asks from the jeep's shotgun seat.

"I don't know. Maybe if you stopped walking and got in a box, you'd fuckin die the whole fuckin way."

D.G. thinks about this. "Maybe." He sings like Chuck Berry with laryngitis: *"I've got de walkin pneumonia and de boogie-woogie flu."*

We ride. D.G. takes the chick's photo out of his pocket and holds it up like Chaplain Urbanec elevating the host. I remember that, after one super-hairy extraction, D.G. told Mr. Stickl that he'd never had a steady girl, but he thought his singleness a blessing. Otherwise, he might not risk as much as he did, and a few more Lurps might die as he huddled in his pocket trying to save his manhood for the Girl Back Home. As a bachelor, though, he could pop out and blast away at the jungle like a who-gives-a-shit wild man.

Then it hits me. "You don't have a wife. You're a fuckin free agent. So *whose* picture is that, anyway?"

"Patti Dickman's." D.G. turns the photo so that I can see it. "Unhappy spouse of Captain Edgar Dickman."

"Unhappy? Why's that?"

"Cuz Edgar's dick, man, is so small he uses it for a phonograph needle."

This tickles me, but also puts me in an odd funk about the state of D.G.'s soul. He could go to hell. Why do I care? I don't even *believe* in hell anymore. And, hey, maybe D.G. showed up at Madame Vinh's planning not just to diddle Miss Bu'ô'um but to steal her affections. I almost stop the jeep and plug him with every bullet in the clip of my .45.

Would I go to hell for murdering—*intending* to murder—a GI that a VC sniper has already fatally shot? This question ignites my brain like a brand setting a hornet's nest afire.

"Watch what you're doing," D.G. says. "You want to kill us both?" He presses the photo of Patti Dickman to his forehead. It sticks like a decal.

Sunlight sparkles on the rice paddies on either side of the raised road. I get the jeep back into its center and tell D.G. I'm taking him to Chaplain Urbanec. The sky pilot will urge him to "let go and let God." He'll tell him that his obnoxious hanging-on has to end, and end soon.

"Spoken like a real self-doubting papist," D.G. says.

Shots sing out across the paddies. A bullet *pings* off one fender. I duck, spin the wheel, and stomp the gas to keep D.G. and me in our current separate states of being and nonbeing. Maybe D.G. laughs. From reflex, he fires his own sidearm out into the gook-infested paddies.

CAPTAIN URBANEC

A lurp everybody else calls Fearless and I call Chester drags the door gunner, Exley, into the plywood building that Major Burke allotted us for religious services and God talk.

Six men are sitting with me in a semicircle discussing grace, the uselessness of REMFs (rear-echelon motherfuckers), and other issues. Three of them beat it even before Exley's corpse starts to befoul the already funky atmosphere. With fingers like sausages, he peels a small photograph from his forehead and sticks it in his pocket. Only Sergeant Pennington, Mike Lamonica, the helicopter pilot Mr. Stickl, and I remain to greet the newcomers, who don't apologize for interrupting us. Instead, Chester says I must give last rites to Exley and send him to Cam Ranh Bay for shipment home in an aluminum box.

"I can't give extreme unction to a dead man, Chester. The Church reserves that sacrament for persons in imminent peril of dying."

Everyone looks at Exley. Candlelight pools in and ebbs from all the men's eye sockets and cheek hollows.

"I'll be right back," Pennington says, and ducks outside. Our cramped sanctuary fills with the smells of sweat and corruption. Pennington ducks back in and sets joss sticks burning in three glass ashtrays. Their counter fragrance doesn't work well—often it's a veil for pot parties—but the men in my chapel don't seem to mind. The nearness of a sky pilot to a walking corpse fascinates them.

"Doesn't the Church call extreme unction the 'anointing of the sick'?" Chester asks me.

"Some priests may. I'm more comfortable with the old term."

"But anointing of the sick' aint wrong?"

"No."

"Well, have you ever seen anybody sicker than a walking dead man?"

"Good question," Lamonica says. "I'd bet his breath wouldn't fog

a mirror And two of the three Mortis Brothers have laid claim to his body "

"Mortis Brothers?" Chester says. "Who're they? Undertakers?"

Lamonica says he meant *algor, rigor,* and *livor mortis* "You get algor mortis when body temp falls to that of your environment Livor mortis occurs when blood pools in the extremities and inter nal organs."

Exley lifts his gangly arms like a horror-movie ghoul. "Rigor mortis aint got me " Lifting his arms proves the point Against all physiological logic, his skeletal muscles have still not rigidified. "Yet," he adds Pennington and Chester, both allegedly heroic Lurps, shrink back I lower Exley's arms and walk him to a chair "I'm an amphibian," he states, sitting down. "I patrol the borderland between life and death. More than half my body's in twilight "

Mr Stockl says, "I'm an amphibian too, D.G."

Exley, who flies with Mr Stockl more than with any other pilot, turns his head. "How you figure?" His eyes, which usually resemble smudged thumbprints, spark with curiosity

"The Army appointed me a warrant officer. I fall somewhere between a noncom and a bona fide officer No one calls me 'Lieutenant' or 'Major,' but no one calls me 'Corporal' or 'Sergeant,' either Everyone calls me 'Mister ' I exist somewhere between the enlisted and the commissioned ranks My borderland takes its boundaries from my technical specialty, flying helicopters "

Finally, Chester slaps his knee "Wow Who'd've ever figured that zombies and warrant officers have so much in common?"

Mr. Stockl flushes in the reddening candlelight "I only meant that, in a real way, D.G. and I are neither one thing or the other. We hang between states that everyone else sees as normal. So the larger world views us as freaks "

"D.G 's got it all over you in the freak department," Chester says

Pennington, a Lurp team leader who I must keep reminding myself is only 22, says, "Hey, D.G , can you like commune with the dead. I mean, get on a radio frequency with people who've bought it? Hear them break squelch from the *real* Beyond?"

Before Exley can answer Pennington's question, Chester asks him if two Lurps who went missing in action five months ago—Road Dog and Fahey—escaped, or were captured, or died

Exley closes his eyes, subjects their names to a disturbing psychic calculus, and quietly says, "Dead—they're both dead."

For a moment the door gunner floats before me as a meaty superimposition on the raw bones of my faith, a ghost of flesh atop a ghost of notions, a make believe Christ in a makeshift chapel, but Pennington pierces my fugue by approaching him

"And who's dead, D.G.?" he asks "Who else besides Fahey and Road-Dog and Yielding and Porteus?"

"Amelia Earhart," Exley replies. "I regret to inform you that Amelia Earhart is dead. And your mother, six years past. And Fearless's kid brother Charles, a decade gone. and Mr. Lamonica's sister-in-law, chronic ileitis, last January, and both your folks, Chaplain, not to mention a favorite aunt, of cancer, and a pretty childhood cousin struck down at 12 by scarlet fever

"Fearless isn't so fearless, really He misses Chaz, and a nun, Sister Filomena, who told him he wasn't a wuss, despite what Cray O'Conley said. The sister struggled with recurrent stomach cysts and many surgeries"—Exley takes a startling in-sucking breath "until she bought the window box because she couldn't afford the farm all when Fearless was 14 and just Chet to everyone who cared. Chet's nigh on to dead, too, along with—"

Chester says, "Shut up, you lousy zombie "

But Exley has already stopped. He interrupts himself with a gesture, pulling the photo that was plastered to his brow out of his pocket and lifting it into the candle scatter so that everyone can see it. "And Captain Dickman's wife, Patti," he says. "Dead Dead at noon today, Topeka, Kansas, time. Shot in the face—this face—by her little boy, with a pistol from the headboard of her and Edgar's king-size bed To sort of quote Petronius, *'She's gone to join the great majority.'* "

THE DOOR GUNNER LOOKS LIKE A MONSTROUS RAG DOLL PLUCKED TO TATTERS BY UNSEEN BEAKS.

No one speaks until Lamonica says, "I'll check that out," and escapes into the night Pennington sits down. Chester slams the wall with his fist. I ask Exley, "What about Captain Dickman and their little boy?"

But *they* belong to the living, the distressed minority, and Exley can say nothing about them Because I need to visit Captain Dickman, I seize Exley by the forearm—an unnatural act—and pull him from the bunker

Lights flash from the westward mountains, either lightning or North Vietnamese rockets The air tastes like a broth of thin sewage and battery acid

"You can't keep doing what you've just done," I tell Exley "Maybe *you d* better join your people, too." (God forgive me for this impertinence)

He slaps my hand aside and blunders away: a sober drunk, a self conscious ape, a walking whited wall

CAPTAIN DICKMAN

Oh my God, no!

SERGEANT PENNINGTON

Rockets strike beyond the revetments shielding our copters Among the Hueys and Cobras, huge azalea-like explosions bloom and fade. Rotors, struts, drive shafts, and cowlings shoot up into the darkness—then, like crazy compass needles or tornado-flung sheets of tin, whirl away

Camp Eagle, an anthill brutally kicked, swarms under the barrage Without my helmet, I run for the revetments carrying no weapon but a .45. Other men scurry, too, in the compounds and out on the perimeter Cannon cockers in the arty rev up to answer the incoming 122mm rounds with our own deafening 155mm guns. Viet Cong sappers have breached our defenses, and, as I run, dodgy silhouettes slide through the elephant grass, a satchel charge bursts in an ammo bunker, and fireworks tumble, kaleidoscope jewels in a high smoky mirror

My every bruising footfall triggers the syllable of a prayer. *Dear / God. / don't / let / me / die. / I / vow / to / do / bet- / ter, / I'll / love / you / like / a / natch / I- / born / son. / A- / men, / a- / men, / a- / men.*

Chaos boiling at the gates, fire dropping from heaven, my future rushing toward me like a racetrack wall. A gook teenager pops up beyond the glinting surf of razor wire on our island shore and trains his AK-47 on the pupil of my eye. He wants me dead the way the parent of a murder victim wants to rip the death-house switch My 45 and my prayer won't help, so I turn sideways—to reduce the size of the bullet pattern that will choreograph my final midnight boogaloo and to await the perforations that will part me forever from the dance

Then D.G. steps in, shielding me and blasting away in gleeful ruthless fury with a Colt Commando. Bullets snap from his cammies like bees or buttons, pieces of body meat whirling away as earlier two helicopters had fragmented. But he doesn't fall or even stagger, and the teenage gook vanishes, engulfed by razor-wire surf and drowned in a brassy horizontal rain.

A C-47—Puff the Magic Dragon—circles the treacherous outer barrens, its 7.62 Gatling guns saturating the grass with death. Tracers crammed with willie-peter dust—white-phosphorus powder—connect their airborne points of origin to the enemy dead with incandescent hyphens. Stitches of relentless silver from a vengeful flying sewing machine.

"Ted," breathes D.G., turning around, "you OK?"

I'm fine, but the door gunner looks like a monstrous rag doll plucked to tatters by unseen beaks. He looks like hell, a zombie denizen of the empire of war. But he doesn't bleed, he's past that, and when my knees buckle, he catches me with one hand, rescuing me again from extinction. I black out anyway....

MR. STICKL

Before he flew with me, back before a sniper picked him off, D.G. saved me, too. I was choking on a piece of stewed python that a J Company lurp had cooked behind his hootch and slipped into my chow. D.G. grabbed me with finger-linked hands and yanked them from my belly to my backbone. I expelled that gob of python like a howitzer shell. Everyone in the mess hurrahed except Major Burke, who had to duck the projectile.

"Jesus, Pierre-Claude, you almost put my eye out!"

I gripped a table and reclaimed my poise. As my name suggests, I am of French-Canadian extraction. Once I felt adrift, even if purposely so, among so many blue-collar Anglo, Afro-American, and Hispanic soldiers. Although I grew up in Washington State, I took my primary helicopter training at Fort Wolters, Texas, and my advanced training at Fort Rucker, Alabama. In these places I acclimated myself not only to the sweltering heat, but also to the skin colors, actions, and mores of the local populations. I can work with anyone, even if they call me Frog, if they recognize my expertise as a pilot and pay me in the coin of respect.

Anyway, the morning after we repulsed the VC attack, Major Burke finds me in the 101st Airborne Division's plywood chapel. Mike Lamonica and I stand on one side of the refrigerator-crate altar on which D.G. sprawls like a sacrificial animal or the guest of honor at a memorial visitation. A candle flickers at each of D.G.'s shoulders, as does a third candle just below his mud-caked boots. He has clasped his hands on his stomach, and his dead eyes cut slowly from side to side, first at me and Lamonica, and then across the altar at Chaplain Urbanec and Sergeant Ted Pennington.

"Fly him to Cam Ranh Bay, Pierre-Claude," Major Burke orders me. "Get him out of here, double-damned quick." He exits the chapel before Urbanec, Pennington, or Lamonica can intercede on D.G.'s behalf. A dead fellow twice killed plays horrible systemic havoc with morale. Major Burke thinks he should have exiled the gunner after his *first* fatal wound.

Pennington nods at D.G. and hacks out rotating his hat like a bashful suitor. Urbanec nears the altar, mumbling in Latin. He places the Eucharist on D.G.'s swollen tongue. Then he dips a Q-tip in the communion wine and swabs D.G.'s lips with the intinctured cotton.

"Christ has paid your fare," Urbanec says in English. "Now you may leave Camp Eagle."

"Take me to the Island of Black Syphilis," D.G. says. "Maybe the poor schnooks there will tolerate me."

"Anywhere you want, D.G.," I answer.

Lamonica begs to go, too. The trip promises him a scoop of major proportions, for no reporter has yet set foot on this fabled island of quarantine.

By noon I have my chopper, the *Huê Home*, tanked with two hundred gallons of fuel, my cyclic stick in hand, and my helmet down over my earphones. With the UPI guy in the copilot's chair, I finish my instrument check.

D.G. rides in the cargo bay with Captain Edgar Dickman, whom Major Burke has granted compassionate leave—to find a shrink at Tan Son Nhut and then to fly to Topeka for his wife's funeral. The major fostered Dickman off on us assuming that I would run an assand-trash mission (men and equipment) to the Saigon area. But I'm not copterng to Tan Son Nhut or any other inland air base, and I've let Lamonica come because I need a writer to record for all you death-destined mortals the secrets of your mythic posthumous journey.

Which is why I fly east over the imperial capital and out to sea rather than south. If depression hasn't entirely incapacitated him, Dickman must wonder why the luminous green of water rather than the broccoli-top green of trees billows beneath the *Huê Home*. In his clueless despair I can almost imagine him leaping from one unguarded door or the other hoping for oblivion or bliss.

On the other hand, maybe not. Before Lamonica and I climbed aboard, he was poring over his wife's bent photo, which D.G. had just returned to him. Maybe studying it will fully engage him until we arrive at the immense pelagic cave and its sentinel spires of karst.

Lamonica speaks into his helmet mike. "How far off is this notorious island of syphilitics?"

"Too far for anyone to get there without me," I tell him.

Even his sunglasses' mirrored lenses can't conceal his foreboding. The crawling shadow of the *Huê Home* on the green marbled end paper parchment of the sea heightens his dread, just as does the empty, loping expanse across which my chopper ferries him and his fellows. We will fly for hours.

Actually, the metal body of a helicopter doesn't fly at all. The disk that the rotor blades create—a streaming halo blur—suspends the fuselage in the air by the mast and carries it along like the gondola of a hot air balloon. If you cut the gondola's tethers, it falls away from the balloon. If the Huey's mast breaks, or if a hairline crack in a blade-root lamination splits and widens, or if the Jesus nut securing the entire mast assemblage fails, the Huey also drops.

No wonder Lamonica fidgets. No wonder most chopper pilots check every control twice and continually pray. In fact, I am the only such pilot who has *no* fear of dying or its uncertain aftermath.

"Tell me something reassuring," Lamonica laughs nervously.

"Chief Seattle once said, 'There is no death, only a change of worlds.'"

But Lamonica isn't reassured. D.G. prowls his thoughts. The imaginary Island of Black Syphilis beguiles him. The fear of falling like a cut loose gondola nibbles at his focus. But I will show him vastly more wonderful terrors. ..

CAPTAIN DICKMAN

I can't credit that Eddie blew her face away. I touch Patti's photo to my lips. The *thwup-thwup* of the rotors mimics the maddening churning of my thoughts. Why did she leave her pistol unsecured? What must Eddie have felt when Mommy's head burst into red, red shrapnel? What must he feel now? Has Patti's sister made it down from Detroit to care for him? Should God strike me dead for training my wife to shoot when I learned my next assignment would carry me to war? Why has Mr. Stickl kicked his bird out over the water when the crow would fly an inland southerly route?

"What's going on?" I shout at D.G. Not long ago he took up his door-gunner post behind the buttinsky journalist impersonating a copilot. He points his M-60 at the dancing sea sparkles.

D.G. shouts something unintelligible, and I realize that Patti has joined him in death—but a paralytic form denying her speech or movement. Why should this lanky sack of shit guarding me *from the ocean* get to talk and move when Patti no longer does? At least D.G.'s gradual dehydration and the flight of the chopper keep his stench from overwhelming me.

But I *am* overwhelmed. The pitch and flow of my memories refuse

to come under control. I see Patti laughing stripping off her clothes—receiving me—squeezing Eddie skull first from her body—holding a living, pink mummy that is partly me in her ghost-white arms—spooning orange glop into his monkey face—tying a pair of powder blue sneakers—running beside a squat, blond pygmy toward a lake outside Topeka—throwing bread to the rude Canadian geese—gazing at a surface that sparkles exactly like the South China Sea.

D.G stands over me with one hand on the bulkhead. His face has slipped since he came into my office, deranged into a gooey and leatherlike mask. One dead eye has finally gone blind. Only the wood smoke and jungle muck soaking his tiger fatigues give off any smell anymore. He's retreated that far from life, a slow withdrawal even from the processes of decay. "Dickman!" he cries. "Dickman, get your head out of your ass!" He uses my name like a curse. Why? I helped keep his sick mother alive, and for many long minutes I've looked upon his hideous mug without flinching.

"Patti's been in touch," D.G. says, tapping his temple with a palsied finger. "She wants to see you."

"Not funny, D.G."

"She wants to see you."

"Fuck you."

"Same to you. But whatever you think of me, Mr. Stickl will carry you to her—straight ahead and down."

This revelation scares me. It's probably a lie. (Who can read the dead?) My hate and fear ooze out even more rankly than D.G.'s. To save myself, to save *him*, I press my back harder against the bulkhead.

"You oughta love me like a son, Dickman. Eddie and I have lots in common—we murder civilians for no good reason."

I should at least tongue-lash the son of a bitch tormenting me, but I don't. My hand opens. The photo on my palm has pleats. My fingers nip the photo in two, and I eat the strips, one at a time. The tastes of stale developing fluid and tender flesh mingle in my head.

D.G. grunts and returns to the door pocket behind Lamonica.

MIKE LAMONICA, UPI

South China Sea, approx. 14.00°N, 110.25°E—The sea off the coast of Vietnam has no remarkable attributes. In its endless calm, it appears to lack both frenzy and secrets. If a chopper had to ditch out here, you half-believe that it would settle easily and float. But your pilot, Warrant Officer Pierre-Claude Stickl, 27, of Bellingham,Washington, has already told you otherwise.

Disquiet makes your heart. Does Mr. Stickl foresee setting down on an island or an aircraft carrier? Will he turn inland before you run out of fuel? You would ask, but his demeanor no longer invites direct inquiry. What if he plans to die and to take you and his other two riders with him?

One of these men, Sp4. Joseph K. Exley, 20, of Valdosta, Georgia, has supposedly died already. Except for talking and walking, his skin tone and his expression support this allegation. Does his presence aboard Mr. Stickl's helicopter foretell a bad end for the entire flight?

The other man in the cargo section, Capt. Edgar Dickman, 31, of Topeka, Kansas, appears grief stricken. His son, Edgar, Jr., 8, killed the boy's mother, Patti R. Dickman, 32, with a pistol he found in his parents' bedroom. The police have ruled the shooting an accident.

An hour passes, and then two, and part of a third. Out your right hand window, the sun edges nearer the horizon, and only a rare sighting of a freighter or a fishing boat convinces you of the reality of your noisy aerial voyage.

Finally, an open range of karst towers appears—so many towers that you can't count them. Each spire is an island or part of a barricade of spires across an island, and each island glows pink or rose or soapstone green. The sunset bronzing the tin mirror of the sea invests the whole group with a disturbing glamour.

"The Chain of Erebus," Mr. Stickl says, "or the Spires of the Dragon Forbearant. They go on for miles."

"Must we go with them?" you dare to ask. "Or is there someplace we can land?"

"Look at them." Mr. Stickl nods. "Do you see even one you'd like me to set my skids on?"

The ever-widening bowl of unroofed stalagmites is an archipelago of spears, an ocean-bound tiger pit. "No," you say. "Not one."

But what options other than ditching exist? Have you traveled to this deep-sea fairyland to die? Are you the only sane person aboard the *Hué Home*? Will you preserve your sanity once the sky has gone dark and the engine begins to cough?

You fly on, dropping to the level of the tallest spires, which pivot about you in apparent slow motion. Below most of their pinnacles cling shrubs, and a few tiny basket boats or sampans navigate the puzzle piece coves and inlets.

"Who comes all the way out here to fish?" you ask Mr. Stickl.

"The hungry. The heroic. They already lack so much that even forfeiting their lives doesn't scare them."

The Spires of the Dragon Forbearant wheel about, pushing ahead like trees in a spell taken petrified wood. A wide plain of seawater streams toward an immense cave between these spires, an island so smooth and black that it looks like a basalt hunchback on the sea's prostrate body. The hole in this hump is of Olympian size.

Mr. Stickl targets this entrance. To keep from wresting the controls from him, and to hold yourself in your own skin, you grab your knees. Mr. Stickl heads into this ebony flume to nowhere, and you can't imagine returning. (Astronauts approaching the funnel of a black hole might experience a like sense of exhilaration and terror, but who else would understand?)

Soon the all-obliterating roar of the sea renders the *thwacking* of the dusk rotors inaudible, and the palate of the cavern darkens above you as the South China sky and the limestone outcroppings of the archipelago vanish behind.

Erebus East—Either the unrelenting roar of water inside the throat of hell stops impinging on your senses, or, three hundred yards inside the grotto, a silence akin to total Mammoth Cave darkness arises. The silence and the darkness grow in twain until they are one indistinguishable substance.

"Doesn't this cave have stalactites or bends in it?" you ask Mr. Stickl.

"Plenty. But chill, OK? I've done this before, and my training included flying by instruments wearing a hood and blind landings on foggy nights at airfields I'd never seen before."

"This feels different to me."

Mr. Stickl barks a laugh. "Really? Well, if it has your gut agitated, keep a tight asshole and your eyes on the lighted dials."

You obey because you must, for the only light available in Erebus East, as the *Hué Home* tracks inward at speed and down by small increments, issues from radiant dial faces and needles. You amaze yourself by continually thwarting the impulse to scream.

"Tell me again why we're doing this."

"Dickman has to meet briefly with his bride, and Exley—Exley's long overdue for check-in and processing."

The blackness outside never lightens or perceptibly marbles. It persists, as does the silence that earther twinned with it. You can hear your heartbeat, but not the copter's engine, and you wonder if Mr. Stickl has already landed his machine atop a mesa or if it has become a boat pitching downstream to Tartarus.

When motes of glancing brightness begin popping into view, you understand that neither of these guesses applies. The *Hué Home* continues to fly, Mr. Stickl to plot you above the flood, and the flashbulb-bright motes whirling toward you to tumble past like a snow of exotic moths.

These moths—for they *are* moths, of a kind—never strike the windscreen, but eddy up and over you, or out and around. Their wingspans measure from a half inch to nearly six, and their antennae look like every bristly thing from tiny ferns to intricate fish bones.

The moths somersault dreamily, their wings showing orange and

melon green, cherry and ivory, or zebra hide and crumpled tinfoil Their change from human spirits to cavern-flying moths has spun them from such materials as acetate, vinyl, enamel, fur, and precious metals, but their bodies weigh no more than milkweed fluff

"Those things really don't move much," Mr. Stickl says. "They hover in this grotto while we putt putt through."

The lepidopteran blizzard abates The moths thin out to a few flickering points, like the universe at its outskirts, and Mr Stickl must again use his instrument training to navigate The darkness grows no darker even when, in your profound anxiety, you close your eyes.

Lights do appear again, but well below the *Hué Home* They blaze at intervals similar to those among the Spires of the Dragon Forbearant. Mr Stickl takes you lower, almost to the height of these strange torches. Cruising forward, you recognize each one as a humanoid form burning, burning, burning—with the inextinguishable passion of a bodhisattva.

These spectral figures induce a familiar horror Aboveground in Saigon, Danang, Quinhon, and Hué, you've seen them before—Buddhist holy men immolating themselves to protest the policies of the South Vietnamese regime Most such suicides ceased with the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem, whose sister in-law, Madame Nhu, once said, "Let them burn, and we shall clap our hands." But here, in numbers surpassing belief, they blaze without letup or apology.

Mr. Stickl says, "They remind me of Thich Quang Duc, the 73-year-old monk from Hué who had an aide douse him with gasoline in Saigon in June 1963 and then struck a match Over time, 30 more monks followed suit, but the sentinels down here must have burned from time immemorial."

"Why?" you blurt, but Mr Stickl merely shrugs.

In our passing rotor wash, the Thich Quang Duc sentinels weirdly reconfigure, shimmering and smoking not on spires but on five-sided stones at the tops of elaborate karst pagodas. You can't see to the bottoms of these shrines or to the floor of the grotto, but the burning figures themselves seem to range to infinity.

You shut your eyes again, and the drifting bubble in your gut suggests that Mr. Stickl has spurred the *Hué Home* a few hundred feet upward You retreat into the self-beguiling safety of a deliberate autism Your journey goes on and on.

"Look," Mr Stickl eventually says.

You obey. The domain of human bonfires has given way to a shiny surface of basalt or pitch as wide as the Tonkin Gulf. On it float thousands of flat-topped vessels with the design of ancient barges but the dimensions of aircraft carriers. The *Hué Home* drops toward the point vessel, from which all the others range out to the rear in a series of interlocking diamonds

"Will we land?" you ask Even though you've wanted to land since entering this submarine world, the prospect of actually doing so frightens you. You seriously consider losing consciousness.

"That's a roger," Mr. Stickl says

The *Hué Home* descends toward the point barge (as much an island as a ship), and you abruptly hear rotors again, continuously *thwacking* This vessel and all the others in the armada boast pagodas for masts, and in the pagodas' windows hang gleaming human-skull lanterns. They flash on and off, as if signaling

Meanwhile, pajama-clad golden wraiths glide over the deck of the barge without touching it. Clearly, they man the vessel Now, though, they flit toward the *Hué Home* expectantly, as they would for approaching aircraft.

CAPTAIN DICKMAN

Mr Stickl cuts the rotors D.G. drags me up from my seat by my shirt and over to the door. Here, he lowers me out onto a surface like black burlap over wood chips, all smelling powerfully of an acrid resin. The cold here bites into my bone marrow. D.G. doesn't jump out with me, and who can blame the son of a bitch? Why crawl into the deep freeze when you can squat in the lettuce crisper? Above the gunwales of this huge ship, mother-of-pearl panels block our view of the other vessels—a thousand or more—in this end time fleet

A dozen childish ghosts—the spirits of annoying urchins in Saigon or Rio or even Topeka, their lower bodies trailing off into mist—pluck at my sleeve and guide me away from the chopper toward a cemetery of upturned aluminum coffins. All across the black-burlap deck, battered coffins stand on end like tombstones, but the one nearest me has an aura about it, and I start bawling even before I get there. Its lid falls forward at my feet with a dull *wbump*, releasing a stink like sulfur and raw acacia, and I raise my hands as if a mugger has stuck a pistol into my ribs.

The coffin doesn't contain Patti, but a three-quarter-length photograph of her in the Topeka morgue. This photo hangs from a hook in the coffin and twists slowly from front to back, revealing my dead naked wife from the rear as well as face-on—a souvenir and an insult at the same time. All the ghostly urchins whirl into and out of her coffin, spinning her glued-together likeness and plucking at my khaki sleeve or trousers as they unceremoniously depart

I know that inside other coffins hang photos of others of the recent dead—Lurps, grunts, helicopter pilots, artillery gunners, nurses, officers, South Vietnamese soldiers, Viet Cong, North Vietnamese regulars, and civilians of every hue and stripe. If I walked among them I'd find Fahey, Portress, Road-Dog, and Yielding, among dozens of others. But I can't leave Patti's photo.

The bullet hole in her forehead reminds me of D.G 's, just as the gray of her flesh in the color photo reminds me of D.G 's gray skin tones. Surely, I think, she is no longer here. Her crossing has transformed her.

Cobalt-blue moths with indigo eyespots on their wings circle a lantern in a nearby pagoda, and their circling gives me a frail hope D G calls me back to the chopper, but I can't get behind that notion Instead, I pick up the coffin lid. A wispy child returns and spins maddeningly about me. I haul the lid toward Patti's coffin and swing it into place with me inside

I've trapped the urchin, too The cold ices my blood, and the frost twinkling about me reminds me too late that an unhappy circumstance changed Eddie, Jr., into yet another orphan, but one who really matters In our upright trap, ice replaces everything in me that formerly moved....

MIKE LAMONICA, UPI

En route to Tartarus—During this layover, you jump out of the chopper's cockpit and climb into the cargo bay with Exley, who says that Dickman has "literally sealed his fate " Mr. Stickl must agree, for he engages the rotors and lifts you from that bleak chthonic deck with scarcely any warning.

"What now?" you shout at Exley, perplexed.

"Transfiguration!" Exley shouts back.

"We don't have enough gas!"

Exley gives you a dry-snipe glare, unimpressed by your bourgeois rationality and concern. The *Hué Home* strays farther into the reaches of nightmare, insensible to the cold and immune to the calculus of fuel loss. The armada of black barges beneath you extends in a web of diamonds to another inner horizon—which, after an epoch of silent traveling, you pass.

"Where the hell are we going?"

"Tartarus." Exley shrugs, and his whole decaying upper body seems to slump inside his shirt. "The Dragon's Maw."

Beyond the last edge of the final level of Erebus, water spills into a silver-purple maelstrom the size of Australia Maybe you are under that island continent. Maybe you have shot along a synapse crackling with the vision of your most potent dread

In any case, the *Hué Home* drops toward this whirlpool, and you lock your teeth against the impact that must result. The shouts and counter-shouts of this nether portal pack your skull with gunpowder and compressed metal springs.

Exley totters across the vibrating cargo bay to your seat and puts his hands on the bulkhead to brace himself. You feel like a midge in the halo of spray at the top of Angel Falls. Exley leans in and yells, Push me out!"

You gape at him like someone lobotomized.

Push me out, Lamonica!

You can't. You won't. The demand violates your self-concept as a respecter of life. But Exley doesn't care. He argues that denying the dead baptism into the covenant of total extinction hardly qualifies you as a priest of integrity.

"You *have* to push me, Lamonica."

"Jump," you say. "Just jump."

"If you make me jump, I'll take you with me."

The argument goes on. How do you know that consenting to push him won't evolve into an opportunity for him to defenestrate you? Because, he retorts, he wouldn't require your permission to fling you overboard; he'd simply do it. On the other hand, *being pushed* will reconnect him to his pre-Vietnam self, the lost young man whom the war has so terribly debased. The logic of this explanation sidesteps your understanding, but finally you accede to it.

Hugging, you and Exley waltz to the door, to the dizzying panorama of the great silver-purple whirlpool. With a strenuous shove, you expel him from the *Hue Home*, then catch yourself on the door frame, panting, and goggle into the abyss as Exley plunges lazily, belly down, toward it.

Soon, he spreads his arms and rolls to his back. His legs bend under him at the hinge of his knees, as if his mud-caked boots were soled with iron. He falls for a long time, dwindling.

Mr. Stickl holds the chopper in a hover above Exley. The deep, purple maw of the Dragon incandesces, fringing Exley in light, and the bullet hole in his brow emits a beam of stinging white toward the *Hué Home*. This taut umbilical links him and your machine all the way down.

When Exley's body has dwindled to a point no bigger than the width of the beam itself, you hurl his M-60 into the pit after him. The chopper shudders, tilts, and plummets after him.

You grab a strap on the bulkhead and cling to it like a bull rider, but the skilled Mr. Stickl has lost control and his machine catapults you across the nonstick metal floor, smiting you slam-bang-silly.

CHAPLAIN URBANEC

Like in Job, where it says, "And only I am escaped alone to tell thee," only the UPI guy came back from Mr. Stickl's last mission, which division intelligence believes ended in a crackup or shoot-down out to sea. Lamonica, though, has gone nuts. In the stories he pounds out in the Danang infirmary, he claims Mr. Stickl flew him, D.G., and Dickman to a secret well of hell, west of Vietnam, as if Vietnam itself doesn't qualify as a smoky annex of that everlasting rubbish heap.

Apparently some gooks in a sampan fished Lamonica out of the water and rowed him to Danang, where the medics treated him as if he were a shell-shocked Lurp. The best of care. Hot and cold slumming nurses. A typewriter from supply. Three squares a day. And time enough to churn out addle-brained fairy tales. We pass his dispatches around the Lurp compound, even give readings of them. Or we *did*, until Pennington collected the carbons and ordered us to stop.

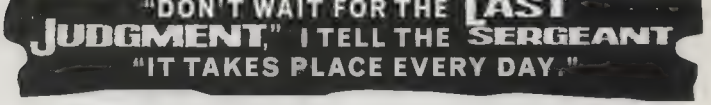
"Out of respect to D.G., if to nobody else," he said. "I mean, how many times did that ugly stud save your bacon?"

And how many times do you want to thank a dead man for keeping you out of his personal territory? Not that many, especially if he puts a rush on your in-town honey. Hailing from South Georgia, bought D.G. some slack with me, sure, but he yanked the rope between us taut more times than I care to remember. He yanked it with his soppy country music, his hard-shell upbringing, his revolt against that raising, and his putrid and peevesome hanging on. All that shit gets old early. Anyway, I'm not sorry I told D.G. to lie down at fuckin last, or that Urbanec stuck a flea to that effect in D.G.'s waxy ear canals. I mean, my God, he wasn't ever a Lurp like Panther Eyes, Cockroach, Carlson, and me, and the dead belong to the dead.

MISS BU'Ó'UM

Sergeant Pennington comes to visit. I like this man. The war has not turned him into a bum or a bragger. After we lie together, he talks about his wife and daughters and the men in his platoon. He has *two* families, one far away, one here. He never says his men's names or talks of what they do, but some have made boom-boom here in Madame Vinh's. Their duties, I think, turn their dreams into scary midnight movies. I surprise the sergeant by asking what has happened to the ugly stink-heavy GI who wanted to visit the Island of Black Syphilis.

Pennington gets his wallet from his pants, pulls a picture from it, and gives it to me. In its front part, six soldiers with painted faces squat before a cloudy helicopter. (The machine has a furry outline and bursts of light all over.) The men hold weapons, not quite smil-



ing. Pennington points at the helicopter's door, where the ugly GI stares out over the heads of the other soldiers. It's a bad picture, the whites, blacks, and silvers all melting together.

"A man in my platoon took this before these six men went on patrol," my visitor says. "But before he did, a guy with a chopper unit borrowed the camera and snapped a shot of Mr. Stickl's chopper just before a rescue mission with his favorite door gunner, Joe Exley."

"I don't understand," I say.

"You've seen this happen before—it's a double exposure. The only recognizable face in the earlier shot belongs to D.G. That same day a VC sniper shot him dead, or mostly dead. And the only recognizable faces in the second image belong to the only two men who died on *their* patrol."

In serious curiosity I ask, "So what does this mean?"

"I don't know." Pennington rubs his forehead, using his fist like a sleepy little boy rubbing his eyes. "Maybe that it's a bad idea to have your picture taken before going out on a mission."

"The other men in the exposures didn't die," I tell him. "So that cannot be what these cloudy images mean."

"Maybe not. Maybe they're meaningless."

I return the weird photo to the sorrowful sergeant. "Of course not," I say. "They mean for you, don't they? Even for me they have meaning." But he does not really seem to be listening.

I pause to think.

After a time I remember something that I read in French in Catholic school, long before I came to work for Madame Vinh. "Don't wait for the Last Judgment, 'I tell the sergeant. "It takes place every day."

The sergeant looks surprised and then confused. Then he frowns, tears the weird snapshot in two and throws the pieces on the floor. One part faces down, the other faces up, and the black-and-silver image of the door gunner seems to watch us from a distance impossible to bridge. ❧

THE DAY PIETRO COPPINO SPOKE TO THE MOUNTAIN

IF WE MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN HONOR AND GLORY, WHICH SHOULD WE CHOOSE? CAN EITHER ONE REALLY SAVE US?

Three days before he spoke to the mountain, Pietro Coppino noticed that Persephone's fingers had begun to droop.

It was 1823 in northern Italy, early October. The beat of horses' hooves in the street below was like the ticking of a giant watch, and children laughed and shouted as if by sheer will they could stave off the close of day. The sun had not quite set, but Pietro's studio was dim, for the blinds were drawn, as always. Hanging oil lamps gave off the only light

Pietro had devoted close to a year to sculpting Persephone and her abductor Pluto, and by the hand of providence the piece was nearly finished. He blew fine marble dust out of the crevices where the dour god's arms wrapped around Persephone's ankles. The shapeliness of her calves drew Pietro's eyes up, up, up along the smooth slope of her leg, which was tensed as she strained to break free from Pluto's hungry embrace. Her arms were lifted to heaven, her eyes wide, her mouth frozen open in a small circle of terror.

The lamplight flickered, and for a moment Persephone's hair shone like a sunlit field of grain. Pietro stepped back, feeling a tightness in his chest. He scratched his pointed white beard, dislodging dust of the same color. Wiping his brow cut a sweaty pink swath across the back of his hand.

BY WILLIAM SHUNN • PAUL LEE

Since he freed the first of her fingers from its marble encasement, she had often affected him that way, with an inexplicable mixture of yearning and grief, but it was an emotion he never let himself examine too closely. Most times when he felt it coming on, he would lay aside his mallets and chisels, lock his gate from the outside, and prowl the busier streets of Sugremaro, hands thrust deep in the pockets of his smock. When he would begin muttering, or even remonstrating with an unseen companion, the local police would take him by the elbow and usher him politely but firmly back to his house. He was a great sculptor, they would tell him in quiet, reasonable tones. Sugremaro was fortunate to have him, they would say, but he was not always good for business. He disturbed the patrons of the sidewalk cafés. He repelled paying customers from the streetside merchants.

Even in his confusion, Pietro always cooperated with the police. Arriving home would bring him back to himself, and he would spend the remainder of the evening in his library with his books—a fine collection of 50 or so, including works on art, science, history, and politics—and a bottle of red wine. He would often fall asleep in his reading chair, and would not reenter the studio until morning, when Persephone called to him again and he responded to her summons with the sharp clash of his tools, the caress of his files and rasps.

But that was most evenings. On this October evening, he did not leave the studio. Momentum was with him. He had spent far more time on Persephone than was prudent for a noncommissioned work, and now he was too close to finishing her to stop. He swallowed his grief and went to his tool cabinet, where he exchanged his white-caked file for a lump of pumice. It was time for the final polishing.

Pietro turned back to Persephone and studied her for a place to begin. That was when he saw what had happened to her hands. As carved, her fingers had radiated like starbursts from her hands, rigid in her terror, straining toward a rescue that would not come. But now he saw that the fingers had begun to curl—not in toward the palms, as might almost have seemed reasonable, but toward the ground, like short lengths of rope, stretched downward in an attitude wholly inconsistent with human anatomy.

Pietro pushed his hands into the pockets of his smock to still their trembling. He still gripped the lump of pumice, and its rough edges bit sharply into the balls of his fingers. He had heard of statues weeping, and Antonio Canova had told him once of a sculpted Christ child whose first two fingers had uncurled in the sign of papal benediction, but in a career that spanned nearly six decades Pietro had never heard of anything like this. He fled the studio, pausing only to bolt the door behind him.

He stumbled through the house and out to the terrace, where he fell against the railing above the street. Breathing heavily, he slid to his knees. A chill breeze ran its fingers down his neck, while the setting sun painted the stucco walls of his house a vivid red. He stared at the door he had just come through. What could such a thing as this mean?

Persephone was the finest sculpture of her day—Pietro knew that already. He had felt something greater than himself move through him as he worked. He had not shaped her so much as he had freed her from a prison of marble. But now she was ruined. Nearly a year's capital and all his future reputation tied up in her, and she could not be shown. What had he done to merit this? Was it punishment for his hubris in at last believing himself on a par with Canova?

Felice had understood these matters intuitively. Perhaps she could have unraveled this mystery. But she was no longer with him, and had not been for 20 years. He would not think of her, no. That was an old, old wound, and cleanly healed.

Passersby on the street below turned their faces upward at the sound of the old sculptor's whimpers, but hurried on into the sunset when they realized who it was. The Northern Apennines looked down upon them all, while the sun turned the streets and streams of the hillside village to sheets of molten bronze. A horse-drawn carriage clacked up the street in pursuit of a shadow as long as a church spire. The air smelled of ashes. Pietro trembled on his terrace.

It was an evening such as this when he had last seen his son. Cesare Coppino had arrived in Sugremaro on the same day the news of Antonio Canova's death had reached there from Venice. He brought with him a tremendous block of snow white marble from his quarry outside Carrara, the same quarry that had birthed such pieces as Michelangelo's *David*.

"This is the finest block of marble the world has ever seen," Cesare had proudly announced as he led his father out to the wagon. "And it is yours, Papa." He threw back the tarp that covered the massive piece of stone.

"My God, Cesare," said Pietro, eyes round. The stone was as smooth and white as milk, and flawless. "I have accepted your marble in the past, but of this I cannot rob you. Why, the profit from it would feed your children for a month."

"My children are in no danger of starving, Papa. Besides, if you do not take it, it will only go to waste as facing stone for some new municipal hall."

Pietro ran his hand lovingly over the marble's translucent surface. "But Cesare—"

His son shrugged and squinted into the sun. "No matter what your conscience says, it belongs here with you. I'm afraid I cannot take it back." He rubbed his chin when his father did not respond. "Perhaps you should not know this, but—ah, well. As we prized this stone from the ground, its groanings spoke like the voice of a man, and in them I heard a name. I heard *your* name, Papa, as clear as you hear me now. So you see, for me to keep this stone for myself—that would be the true robbery."

Pietro stared at the cobblestones at his feet, wringing his hands, feeling a tightness in his throat. Cesare understood the ways and even the language of rock better than anyone he knew, except perhaps Felice. Cesare's voice in such matters carried authority. "Thank you, my son," he said softly. "You have convinced me. I will keep the stone."

Cesare smiled. "Good."

That day Pietro Coppino was a man reborn. As his son and a few hired men struggled to move the block of marble into his studio, Pietro was happy, despite the news of Canova's death. He had loved Antonio Canova like a brother, but he believed that the mantle of greatness, which could only be worn by one man at a time, may have passed to him at last. The arrival of such an excellent piece of marble on that very day could only bode well.

Before the hills had risen that evening to cover the sun, Pietro had sketched in four views of Persephone and Pluto on the block's four vertical faces, not even bothering with smaller studies in clay. As he worked, he felt the first stirrings both of greatness and of the nameless emotion that was later to beset him so frequently—though at the time he confused the two as one and the same. Cesare tarried a while that evening to rest, but set out for Carrara by the light of the moon. He knew his father preferred not to entertain once a new project was under way.

Recalling these things, Pietro turned his fearful face east, toward Venice. His lovely Persephone, once so full of promise, was now cursed. Perhaps, he thought, dead Canova was responsible, gimmicking the marble from the far side of the grave, jealous of what beauty had been wrought in his absence. But Pietro shook his head, for Antonio Canova had nothing to envy of him. *The Abduction of Persephone* was a single masterwork; Canova had a dozen scattered throughout Italy and France, and even one in the city of Raleigh, across the Atlantic in America. That was a statue of George Washington garbed as a Roman hero, and his old friend had invited Pietro to the unveiling. No, Canova would certainly not be so petty, even though Pietro had been unable to make the long journey. Greatness allowed for magnanimity.

Pietro interrogated himself aggressively, but could think of no enemies who might have reason to want to cast such an ensorcellment. Was it merely a chance occurrence then—the result, say, of some

inauspicious juxtaposition of planets? The old sculptor pursed his lips. Possibly ... though the notion would have struck him as more plausible were there a planet in the heavens named for Pluto, as there were for so many others of his family.

Pietro Coppino spent the remainder of his evening huddled on his terrace, propounding and discarding theories like a gardener might pluck up and cast out weeds. The sun sank into the abyss, the mountains into the earth's dark shadow, and the old sculptor deeper and deeper into his thoughts. A cold autumn wind blew down from the slopes above. Pietro shivered, but he could not rouse himself enough even to creep inside for a blanket. A statue with melting fingers held sway over his house, and that fact alone kept him rooted in place until sleep covered him like tumbled stones.

He awoke with a start, gasping for breath.

Orioles sang in nearby trees, and sunlight strained through the railing of the terrace like arms through the bars of a cell. He had been asleep. He had dreamed. In his dream he had seen a tall mountain forested with willows, all carved from marble. The sun shone through their translucent white leaves with a luster greater than any field of snow. He was drawn to the mountain without volition, to the alabaster branches that swayed and wept in the wind, but when he ventured among them the branches seized him and began to constrict.

He stood up and breathed deeply. His back was sore and his muscles ached and his sinuses felt inflamed. Stifling his dread, he pushed open the door to the sitting room and went inside. The house was very cold, so he started a fire in the kitchen stove. He found a clean handkerchief in the bureau in his bedroom and blew his nose loudly. His fingers were knobby and stiff.

He put a kettle of water on the stove, and then, because he could think of no other way to delay it, he went to the studio. He paused at the door several moments, then pushed inside.

The studio was dark and smelled of burnt rope. He had left the lamps burning the evening before, and they had consumed all their oil and devoured their wicks. It was too dim to see the statue, but if he left now to fetch light he knew he would not have the courage to return. He crossed the dark studio to the blinds.

In 40 years, those blinds had rarely been opened. Pietro preferred to work by light of lamps, for the touch of the sun could work strange illusions on surfaces of marble. A chisel might be wrongly placed, or wrongly struck, and weeks of toil would come to nothing. He pulled the cord, and the blinds from two adjacent walls rattled open with the sound of dancing bones. He pulled another cord, and the skylight was uncovered. Squinting, Pietro turned to face Persephone and Pluto.

This time, to his credit, he did not flee. The pale light drew only a faint milky glow from the marble, but Persephone was beautiful nonetheless, and Pluto's tortured, hungry, lonely face as horrible as ever. Despite the fearful beating of his heart, Pietro felt pity for his creation. The disease had spread past Persephone's elbows. Her forearms hung like limp jungle snakes, gravity had stretched her fingers until they trailed from her hands like streamers of moss. Her lower lip had slid away from her teeth and now melded with her chin, making her aspect more terrible than Pluto's, though it was still more beautiful. The cry Pietro had sculpted upon her lips no longer seemed to stem from terror of the Underworld, but from the prospect of slow physical dissolution.

Pietro approached her slowly. Hesitantly, like a young man touching a girl for the first time, he pressed his fingertip to one of her hands. It was cold, smooth, and solid, as marble should be—nothing like the soft, yielding fat he had somehow anticipated. He felt he could have broken off her fingers like icicles from the eaves. He drew his hand back, gingerly stroked his white beard, and then reached between her drooping arms to touch her cheek. His chin quivered.

Because there was nothing else he could do for her, he drew the blinds and left her alone with her mad, jealous lover.

The kettle was boiling, but Pietro did not bother with tea, or with any breakfast at all. Coughing, he exchanged his rumpled smock for a cap and long woolen coat and descended to the street. He spent the remainder of the morning at an outside table at Crespi's. He drank coffee mixed with amaretto, trying to deaden a sour feeling of guilt, and watched leaves fall from the potted trees. The waiters kept Pietro's cup full, hoping that if they humored the old sculptor he might go away before their lunchtime patrons arrived. The police strolled by from time to time to see that Pietro did not become disorderly, but he behaved, as always, with a dignity only slightly frayed.

The shadows were very short when Pietro realized that he had not succeeded in becoming drunk. He was about to signal for his bill when a brawny man younger than he, but still not young, appeared. "There you are, Papa," said the man. "Oh, I'm *so* relieved to find you. I've searched for you all over town."

"Cesare?" said the old sculptor, rising.

"Ever the same," said his son, spreading his arms.

Delighted, Pietro kissed his son and embraced him. He waved at the empty chair across from his. "Please, sit down."

"Thank you," said Cesare.

"What on earth brings you back to Sugremaro?" said Pietro, a willful smile sitting falsely on his lips. "I ... am not quite ready for a new block of marble."

"But a new one is long overdue, nevertheless." Cesare offered what looked like a genuine smile, though he was pale and drawn, with discolored bags beneath his eyes. "Ah, things have been slow in Carrara, and I thought a little time away might be nice. It's been nearly a year, after all."

"Has it?" said Pietro. He shook his head. "Yes, I suppose it has. I don't seem to keep track of time very well anymore. I don't seem to keep good track of *anything*, to be honest."

A waiter appeared with a cup for Cesare and a fresh one for Pietro. Cesare blew on his and sipped it cautiously. "You're talking like an old man, Papa," he said with a tired smile.

"I *am* an old man. It's allowed. Whereas *you* look like you've been nding all night."

Cesare nodded, suddenly somber. "Yes, Papa. I have."

"It's 50 miles from Carrara. Why?"

Cesare pursed his lips. "Last evening, at sunset, an oriole laid a marble egg on my back steps. When I picked it up, meaning only to find the nest and return the egg, it crumbled to dust in my fingers." Cesare looked tiredly at his old father. "I was worried about you. I feared—well, that doesn't matter. I came. Maybe you can tell me why."

Pietro's false smile dissolved. He sighed as if a great load had returned to his shoulders. Something dull gnawed at the center of his chest. He looked at his hands. "You remember the marble you brought me last year?"

"Certainly," said Cesare. "I've been curious to see what you've done with it."

"What I've done with it is unimportant at the moment. It's what it's done with itself."

"And what would that be?"

AS THE AFTERNOON WORE BY, PIETRO FELT UNWELCOME SNATCHES OF THE PAST SWARMING CLOSE.

Pietro coughed. "Yesterday it began to melt."

"To melt?" Cesare's eyes narrowed, and he leaned his elbows on the table. "You mean into liquid?"

"No, not like that. It's more as if ... how to describe it?" The old sculptor stared out across the piazza. "They say Antonio Canova's talent was first discovered through a lion he modeled in butter. If his lion lost its shape in the sun, while remaining solid to the touch, that is what this would be like."

"So the marble is solid ... but it looks like it's melting."

Pietro shrugged. "More or less."

"Papa ... what have you been carving from it?"

The old sculptor looked at the fiery trees dotting the piazza. "Persephone. Her abduction at the hands of Pluto."

Cesare's face brightened. "An excellent myth," he said, "and very suggestive. Is the entire thing affected?"

"For now, just the arms. But last night it was only the fingers." He tugged at his beard. "Oh, my son, she was very nearly finished. I had hoped to inscribe my name in her palm this very day."

Cesare leaned back in his chair, folded his hands, and was silent for several minutes. Pietro had another cup of coffee, which he sipped delicately while he waited for his son to speak. The noontime shadows crept into hiding, then stole out again in the opposite direction before Cesare tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger.

"This would make more sense," he said quietly, "if we had not each already made our peace with the mountain, you and I."

"What mountain?" asked Pietro. "You talk like a crazy man." But inside him gnawed a worm of disquiet.

"Strange, Papa—that's what everyone I've spoken with today says about you."

Pietro waved dismissively. "You know how people like to talk."

"And I know how much you hate to. But surely you haven't forgotten?"

"By my mallets and chisels, Cesare, I don't know what you mean."

Cesare tapped his nose again. "Papa," he said quietly, "do you suppose this has anything to do with Mother?"

Pietro found he could not sit still. "Your mother is gone, Cesare."

"Yes, I know. But that doesn't change my question."

A numbness, a panic, spread through Pietro's chest—a bitter admixture of yearning and grief. "Please, Cesare ..."

Cesare stared hard at his father. Then he placed a few coins on the table and stood. "Come, Papa."

Pietro shrank back in his chair. "For what? Where are we going?"

"First I want to see the statue. Then, I suspect, I'll be taking you to Monte Cimone."

"Cimone?" said Pietro, making furrows of his brow.

"Papa, like soot must be swept from a chimney, there are dead ashes inside of you which need to be swept out. Speaking to the mountain may prove vital."

Pietro shook his head. "I don't need to speak to any mountain."

Cesare sighed and sat down again. "Papa, remember 20 years ago when I first owned the quarry, how the stone would always crack or shatter as it came out of the ground? Remember—?" He looked away, blinking furiously. "But you recall as well as I do. How could you not? Treating with the mountain proved necessary then, and it may prove so again now."

When Cesare stood to leave the café, Pietro followed obediently, loath to belabor the depth of his confusion.

Cesare had not come to Sugremaro on horseback, as Pietro had supposed, but in a carriage drawn by a team of four horses. Pietro waited with the carriage in the street while Cesare entered the house to inspect Persephone.

When Cesare returned, he looked troubled and grim. "All haste," he said, and swung himself up to the driver's perch.

All the rest of that day they traveled, and well into the night. Pietro, seated out of the wind, huddled in his coat and coughed as his son drove the team and himself without mercy. He cursed himself for not having bid Persephone farewell. Since the work began, he had never been away from her for more than an evening. What would she think when the sun came up? She deserved to know that he had not abandoned her. In the cold and the dark, Pietro damned his weakness, his fear, his traitorous addled brain.

Once they had crossed the pass southeast of Borgo Val di Taro, it was a straight run downhill through Pontremoli to Carrara, the end of the first leg of their journey. But it was a long run as well, and hours before the tangy breezes of the Ligurian Sea supplanted the thick scent of pinaster from the mountains, Pietro had fallen into a dreamless sleep. He awoke long enough when they arrived in Carrara, halfway to their goal, to let himself be led to the guest room of Cesare's manse. "Let's go, you old sluggard," Cesare said patiently as he trooped the sculptor past an honor guard of sleepy but curious grandchildren. "You can lie down in here."

In the morning, Pietro broke his fast with his grandchildren and their mother. Cesare was still asleep. "Papa has asked me to take you with me today," said Benito, Cesare's eldest, after the meal. "He says you and he will set out again tomorrow."

Bundled up in a borrowed coat and cloak, Pietro followed his grandson through the lively streets of the city and into the foothills. Benito was well into adolescence and would soon be a man. He worked at his father's quarry, which was where he took his grandfather. Pietro stayed there most of that day, perched on a grassy hummock as Benito and the other workmen labored in the great pit with their wire saws and channeling wedges. At noon they generously shared their lunches with him. Each man seemed to want a moment to touch the hand of the great Pietro Coppino, the sculptor who kept the fame of their quarry alive and its fortunes flowing, but for once Pietro felt uncomfortable with the attention. It was as if the workers were adoring a statue, not a living man of flesh and blood.

The day was cool. As the afternoon wore by, Pietro felt unwelcome snatches of the past swarming close, conjured by the unearthly white glow of the marble pit, the ringing of the chisels, the smell of the workmen's sweat. When one man made a bad stroke with his mallet, provoking a noisy fall of rocks from the wall of the quarry, Pietro jumped to his feet with an agility he had not possessed in years, losing his cap. His heart pounded wildly, but the mishap had been small. Coughing like a man on his deathbed, the old sculptor bent to retrieve his cap.

At sunset, as the men put away their stoneworking tools, Pietro climbed down into the quarry and pressed himself against the cooling marble. He ached to embrace the stone forever, and never rise again. Benito had to call his name three times and tug him by the hand to rouse him from his trance.

Cesare slept throughout the day. At evening he rose for supper, and afterward returned again to bed. Early the next morning, before the sun rose far enough to gild the western sea, he bundled Pietro into the carriage. Balking on the running board, for their errand had begun to weigh heavily on him, Pietro asked his son why it had to be Monte Cimone, why he could not have spoken to the mountains at Carrara instead.

"When you speak to a man," said Cesare patiently, "you do not speak to his knee, or to his elbow. You speak into his ear. Monte Cimone is the head, and therefore the ear, of all the Northern Apennines, and that is where you must address them."

They sped down the coast, and at Viareggio they turned inland. By midday they had reached Lucca, where they stopped for a brief meal. They kept on to Capanotti and at last passed through humble Pescia at the feet of the mountains. Many villagers watched their carriage thunder by, but Cesare did not halt.

An hour or more into the foothills, Cesare reined in the horses. When he opened the door to hand his father down, he found the old man pulling hairs from his beard in his anxiety.

"What is it?" asked Cesare.

"Nothing," Pietro said gruffly, brushing the wiry white filaments from his trousers and wiping his eyes. The journey had been an unpleasant one for Pietro, a road to rediscovery, to the laying bare of memories he had buried deep, deep in his heart's stony soil. "If

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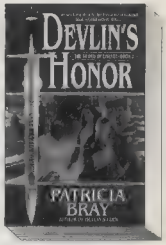

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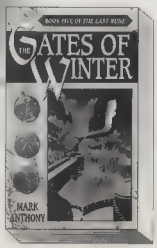

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SPECTRA

you can help it, Cesare, do not grow old. Age does not make old men of us—it makes old women."

Cesare helped his father to the ground. The air was fresh and cold, and Pietro felt it stealing into his lungs with its jealous claws. Monte Cimone rose before him like a king amidst kneeling subjects.

"You'll have to walk the rest of the way yourself, I'm afraid," said Cesare. "This is as far as I can take the carriage."

Pietro eyed Cimone with trepidation. His heart quailed. "Cesare, please. What business have I with this mountain?"

"*I* cannot tell you," said Cesare, his thick arms folded across his chest. "Only you know that—and it."

The old sculptor took the first tottering step along his path, then turned to Cesare with beseeching eyes. "My son—where do I begin? What does one say to a mountain?"

"Come, Papa. You've been here before, and daylight is short."

"But Cesare ..." Pietro shook his head. "When we came here before, we each went in turn. You approached first, I second. But I ... when I drew near Cimone I stood dumb, searching for my voice. But such anger filled my heart, I could not find it. I couldn't speak. Cesare ..."

"So you made no peace," said Cesare, eyes glittering.

"I made no peace."

Cesare nodded his head, though his jaw clenched in his visible effort to master himself. "But you led me to think otherwise," he said. "Now it all makes sense. For 20 years I've reserved Cimone's finest marble in your name. Twenty *years*, Papa. Had I known the danger to my family, I would have sent you none of it."

"Cesare, I never—"

"Go, Papa! It's not far. The path is well marked if you watch for it. And this time, for God's sake, *speak*. Cimone's waited long for its revenge, but it appears its patience now is running short."

Pietro nodded. He drew a used handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose raw. With a bitter sigh, he set off down the overgrown path.

"Show courtesy, Papa," said Cesare to his father's back. "Show respect. Treat it as you would a patron—better, even. Remember to take off your hat."

Pietro raised a hand without turning.

The mountain commanded his attention. Brilliant white snow crowned its brow, and its slopes were swathed in the autumnal glory of a sweet chestnut forest. The sun, low in the sky to the old sculptor's left, cast a regal and fiery cloak round the mountain's shoulders. Monte Cimone grew no larger as Pietro approached it; in fact, his perspective seemed not to change in any way as he followed the path down and up over grassy, golden hillocks. He reached the end of the path almost before he was aware that any time had passed.

He looked up at the mountain. Self-consciously he cleared his throat.

Small animals chittered. Birds argued overhead. The wind sighed contentedly. Pietro glanced from side to side. His throat hurt. He cleared it again, noisily, and spat on the ground. Belatedly he remembered to take off his cap.

He waited. Nothing happened. He clenched the cap to his chest. "So," he said, somewhat uncertainly. "Signore Montagna, my old friend. I hope you've been well."

Crickets chirped in perfect time—*tchick, tchick, tchick*. Pietro twisted his cap in his hands.

"My son suggested we talk," he said. "He's a good boy, a smart boy. He knows rock. He learned it from his mother. But you know that already, I suppose. The two of you would appear to be well acquainted."

Pietro looked from side to side. He chuffed, his breath dancing like smoke in the cold air.

"So what is this problem we seem to have, Signore Montagna?" He spoke heartily, stuffing his voice with guilelessness as the butcher stuffs a sausage casing. "I'm an old, old man, getting by the best I can. Surely you have better things to do than torment the likes of me, who will soon be dust at any rate. Eh?"

Pietro bared his teeth in an ingratiating smile, but his knuckles where they clutched his cap were white as marble. The wind whistled gamely, and the birds continued to sing. Slowly the smile faded from Pietro's face. He nodded in comprehension.

"So, Signore Montagna," he said. His voice cracked and he began to cough. "So this is how it is to be. As long as I am here, let me tell you a story."

Pietro drew out his handkerchief and blew his nose. "My apologies," he said. "I'm not well. But 20 years ago I was. I had no small reputation already, and a beautiful wife, her hair just turning silver. Through hard work and good fortune, our son had acquired a magnificent marble quarry near Carrera, the selfsame one that had provided my stone for years and years. He was so proud, so eager to show it off to us, despite the troubles it had given him. His letters nearly caught fire from his fervor.

"Finally we made the trip, Felice and I. We were in the pit with Cesare, watching the delicate stonework proceed, when a misplaced hammerstroke brought down an entire wall of rock. Cesare and I and the workmen escaped without harm, but Felice ... well."

Pietro wiped his nose and returned his handkerchief to his pocket. "Cesare took this as a sign of your displeasure with his lack of obeisance, and mine. He determined to make his peace and enjoined me to do the same. But you will understand when I say I could not find it in my heart to beg forgiveness."

Near Pietro's feet lay a gray-white stone like the skull of a small animal. He picked it up and studied it. "This is what you give me, worthless sheddings that are of no use to you. For this I should thank you?" He shook the stone in his upraised fist. "You should thank *me*, Signore Montagna! You've made my heart an empty crypt, turned my tears to choking dust inside me, and still I take your cast-off bits and with my own two hands work them into objects fit for kings. This honor I do you year in and year out, but for you even this is not sufficient."

Pietro spat again in the grass and stamped his foot. "You're a highwayman, Signore Montagna, a brigand—a robber of old men and a murderer of old women! First you take my wife, and now you take my masterwork, my greatest creation? I do not accept this! I would not bow down to you then, and I will not bow down to you now! *Persephone you cannot have!*"

The words echoed like cannonfire from the mountainside. Birds scattered, and a slow silence enfolded Pietro as all sound died away. He was poised to throw the stone with all his might, but he did not. Gradually his arm relaxed.

"Persephone—she is my knife in your heart," he said bitterly. "You've felt each stroke as I carved her. I see that now. So how does my knife feel in your heart, Signore Montagna? Not so good, eh? No, not so good."

The wind was quiet.

Pietro threw down the stone in disgust. He put his cap on. "We are even, Signore Montagna," he said. "Good day."

Pietro and Cesare spent the night at an inn in Pescia. By the next evening they had reached Cesare's home in Carrara. Cesare invited Pietro to stay on a day or two, spend time with his grandchildren, but, anxious and impatient, Pietro insisted they continue

Continued on page 116

"PERSEPHONE, YOU CANNOT HAVE!"

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Crouching there in the darkness of the 102nd floor, Smith fumbled for the skin-bag of knucklebones. Somewhere down below in the stairwell—probably the ninety-fifth floor by now, judging from the briefly ricochets of their flashlight beams on the walls, coming up—the posse was sniffing him out. Soundlessly he put his good shoulder against the fire door, but it was solid. Probably bulged and wedged for months since Smith had made the big mistake.

He was effectively trapped in a chimney. The dead stairwell of the excess dust was the Empire State Building, in the corpse that was New York City, in the mammoth graveyard he had made of the world. And finding the only escape hatch closed off, he reluctantly fumbled at his belt for the skin-bag of knucklebones.

Smith. First and last of the many men. About to cast the runes again.

The posse had reached the ninety-ninth floor. If he were going to do it—terrible!—he had to do it now.

He hesitated a second. There were fifteen or sixteen men and women in that pack. He didn't want to hurt them. Despite their slavering hatred, despite their obvious intention, he was reluctant to call into effect that power again.

He had done it before, and destroyed the world.

He's gotta be up there, one of them called down to the rest of the pack. "Now we got 'im."

The silence they had maintained since morning, climbing like insects up the inside of the Empire State, was suddenly broken. "Let's take 'im," called another one. The slap-slap of their rag-and-hide-wrapped feet on the metal stairs rose to Smith. He swallowed and it tasted sour, and he upended the skin-bag.

The knucklebones spilled chattering on the landing. The pattern was random; he murmured. Hunkered

[illegible] kiss of a breeze in the stairwell. A breeze that was peculiarly bittersweet, the way Holland chocolates used to be. A chill breeze that broke sweat out on Smith's spine, in the hollow between his shoulder blades. Then the screams began. Below him, on the one hundredth floor.

Terrible screams. Small creatures with things growing inside them, pushing their vital organs out of alignment; then out through the skin. Watery screams. As solids turned liquid and boiled and ran leaving their containers empty husks. Short, sharp screams. As dull cutting edges appeared where none had been before, and severed the flesh that had contained them when they were merely bones. Then the screams stopped. The silence that had climbed with the posse since morning [illegible] silence deepened, returned.

Smith crawled away from the knock-kneed fan into the corner of the landing, drew his bony knees up to his bearded chin, and whimpered. The breeze—casting about like an animal that was still hungry—reluctantly died away, fled back to the place from which it had come

Smith, alone. Caster of runes. Reader from a strange grimoire only he could interpret. The only survivor of the catastrophe he had caused The only survivor because anyone else out there was merely one step away from animal. Smith, whimpering

Smith, alone

Alone The terrible word broke away out of him like projectile vomit "Alone!" and fled to the walls, rebounded to sting him, turned echo-edged and rebounded again

"But for me " Then a girl laughed girl-laughter, and down amidst the silence was the sound of quick soft footsteps, and again girl laughter, not spread about on the floor below, but right in the stairwell And it was laughter again, footstepping up and nearer

Terror and joy, terror and joy, shock and disbelief. Terror and joy and a terrible fear oh, guard, oh fight, oh run, *look out!* Grunting *aieh!*, grunting *hah!* Smith scrabbled to his knucklebones, so hurried that he would not take standing-time, but hurried hunkering, hams and knuckles, to his knucklebones. He swept them into a clack-chattering heap, and with "Mind now," he cautioned her (whoever she was), "I'll cast again. I will!" He plucked up a bone, fumbled in the blackness for the magic bag, put in the bone, plucked up another, his shiny-dry dirty hands doing his seeing, for his eyes were elbow-useless for seeing in such a black

"But oh! I love you," she said, so near now she could say it in a strumming whisper and be heard: oh! what a voice, oh a clean warm woman's voice, full of care and meaning: but oh! she loved him.

Terror and joy He plucked up the last of the bones, his eyes in the black-on-black, driving at the doorway to the stairs, where now a handtorch flashlightwinged an agony into him, and he cried out. The flash was gone a-borning, too brief, almost, to have a name at all, gone before its pointed tip had slashed its way from lens to optic nerve, gone long before its agony was done with him. And something alive, *life alive even after what he had done,* life alive was breathing in the dark

A threat, a warning—yes and a kind of begging. *Be real! and in God's name don't make me do it again!*—he rattled his bag of bones

The torch lit, arced, wheeling and swording a great blade of light, scraping and spinning across the floor to him The flashlight struck the one knee he had down and he screamed, not for the knee but for the light sandblasting his unready open eyes. She made wide-smiling, welcome-words "Here's light, my darling darling Look at me "

He hand-heeled the scorching water out of his eyes and picked up the light He pointed it at the doorway, and the man who stood there was seven feet, one and a half inches tall and wrapped in rags, he had a bloody beard down to his clavicles and a split stomach, and when the light hit him he bowed down and down and crashed dead on his face. He was a man whose liver was homogenized and had sweated out through the pores of his back—all of it, and a liver is a very very large thing, he knew that now

"Oh please," she begged him, "find me beautiful ..." and since he had not thought to move the light and the big dead bloody-bearded man stood no longer in the wall, he saw a naked woman standing well back from the doorway, at the head of the stairs

For a long time he crouched there with the light in one hand and his bag of bones in the other.

He rose to his feet and the bones tumbled a whisper down the path of light to the woman. He was ever so careful, because perhaps if the light left her she might be gone. He took a careful step, because perhaps she would escape. But no, but no, she waited there sculpture-still and he went to her

She looked straight and unblinkingly at the light as the light grew and grew near, until at last he could reach her. He transferred the bag to dangle from the fingers that held the light, studying her face as he had studied the darkness. He knew the instant before he touched her what his hand told him when it touched: that she was dead. She toppled away from him backward and down, and disappeared in the darkness of the stairwell. The final sound of the fall was soft, vaguely moist, but ended

Smith backed to the wall of the landing The first finger of his right hand went idly to his lips, and he sucked on it. It had to have been a cruel joke of his own magic These perambulating corpses Something inherent in the incantations as they were filtered down through his consciousness, his conscience, his libido, his id They were sympathetic magic, and that meant he, himself, Smith, was an integral part, not merely the voicebox Not merely a way-station through which the charms worked. He was part *of* them, helped form them, was as necessary as the wood into which the nails were driven to form the shell of the house And if this were so, then the filtering process was necessarily influenced by what he was who he was, what he thought so

Side-effects

Like the destruction of the civilization he had known. Like the hideous torments that came to those he was compelled to destroy Like the walking dead Like the visible, tangible, terrifying creatures of his mind; that came and went with his magic

He was alone, this Smith But unfortunately, he was alone inside a skull densely populated with Furies

In the hotel where he called a home that barricaded cistern to which entrance was only possible through the ripped and sundered walls of the IRT 7th Avenue subway tunnel just north of 36th Street, Smith collapsed with weariness He had failed to get the canned goods. His mouth had watered for days, for Cling peaches, for that exquisite sweetness He had left the eyrie late the night before, heading uptown toward a tiny Puerto Rican *bodega* he had known was still intact. A grocery store he had seen soon after the mistake, and around which he had once had widershins, placing a powerful incantation in the air, where it would serve as shield and obstruction

But crossing Times Square—with the checkerboard pattern of bottomless pits and glass spires—the posse had seen him They had recognized his blue serge suit immediately, and one of them had unleashed a bolt from a crossbow. It had struck just above Smith's head, on the frame of the giant metal waste basket that asked the now-vanished citizenry of Manhattan to **Keep Our City Clean.** Then a second bolt, that had grazed his shoulder. He had run, and they had followed, and what had happened, had happened, and now he was back. Peachless He lay down on the chaise-longue, and fell asleep at once.

The incubus spoke to the nape

Have we opened him up enough yet? No, not nearly enough We counted too much on the first blast *But what's left?* Enough is left that I still have difficulty emerging. We'll have to wait They'll do it to him, and for us. There's all the time in eternity. Stop rushing. *I'm concerned I have my Principals as well as you, and they have equally as unpleasant a way of making their wishes and sorrows known as yours.* They'll have to wait like mine. *They won't wait* Well, they'll have to. This is a careful operation. *They've waited two million eternities already* You turn poetry, but that isn't the figure. *A long time, at any rate* Then a few more cycles won't twit them that much. *I'll tell them what you said* You do that. *I can't guarantee anything.* When did you ever? *I do my best* That's an explanation, not an excuse. *I'm leaving now.* You're fading; it's obvious you're leaving. *You'll stay, with Smith?* No. I'll leave him, and go take a rest at the black pool spa . of course I'll stay with him! Get out of here. *Arrogance!* Imbecile!

Smith slept, and did not dream. But there were voices. When he awoke, he was more weary than when he had lain down. The grimoire still stood open, propped against the skull on the kitchen table he had set against the wall The charts were still there, the candle was still half-down

Something ferocious was gnawing at the back of his mind. He tried to focus on it, but it went chittering away into the darkness. He looked around the cistern. It was chill and empty. The fire had gone out. He swung his legs off the cot and stood up. Bones cracked. There was pain in his shoulder where the crossbow bolt had grazed him. He went to the rack and took out a corked decanter, pulled the cork with his teeth and let the dark gray smoke-fluid within dribble onto the raw, angry wound.

He was trying to remember. Something. What?

Oh ... yes. Now he remembered. The girl. The one who was spreading the word about him. *Blue serge suit*, she was telling them, crowds of them, rat-packs in the streets, *blue serge suit, a little weasel man, with a limp. He's the one who did it. He's the one who killed the world.*

If he'd been able to get out of the city, he might have been able to survive without having to kill anyone else. But they'd closed off the bridges and tunnels . . they were now actively looking for him, scouring the city. And beyond the city ... now .. it wasn't safe.

Not even for him, for Smith who had done it.

So he had to find the girl. If he could stop her mouth, end her crusade to find him, he might be able to escape them, go to the Bronx, or even Staten Island (no, not Staten Island- it wasn't there.)

He knew he must find her quickly. He had had dreams, there in the cistern. He had gone to Nicephorus to glean their meanings, and even though he read Greek imperfectly, he found that his dream of burning coals meant a threat of some harm at the hands of his enemies, his dream of walking on broken shells meant he would escape from his enemies' snares, his dream of burning incense foretold danger, and his dream of holding keys meant there was an obstacle in the path of his plans. The girl.

He prepared to go out to find her. He took a piece of virgin parchment from the sealed container on which had been inscribed the perfect square in Latin.

S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T
O P E R A
R O T A S

and with the dried beak of a black chicken he wrote in purple ink he had made from grapes and shoe polish, the names of the three Kings, Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. He put the parchment in his left shoe, and as he left the cistern he made the first step with his left foot, pronouncing the names softly.

Thus he knew he would travel without encountering any difficulties. And he wore a black agate, veined with white. To protect him from all danger and to give him victory over his enemies.

Why had they somehow failed him at other times?

IT WAS NIGHT. THE CITY BLOOMED WITH AN ECRIE HOT ORANGE COLOR, AS THOUGH it had lain beneath great waters for ages, then the water had been drained away and the city left to rust.

He conjured up a bat and tied to its clawed foot a kind of kite-tail made from the carefully twined and knotted hair of men he had found lying dead in the streets. Then he swung the bat around and around his head, speaking words that had no vowels in them, and loosed the bat into the rusty night. It flew up and circled and squealed like an infant being skewered, and when it came back down to light on his shoulder, it told him where she was.

He turned the bat free. It swooped twice to bless him, then went off into the sky.

It was a long walk uptown. He took Broadway, after a while avoiding the checkerwork of pits without even seeing them. The buildings had been turned to glass. Many of them had shattered from the sounds in the street caverns.

There was a colony of things without hands living in rubble-strewn shops on Broadway and 72nd Street. He got through them using the black agate. It blinded them with darkness and they fell back crying for mercy.

Finally he came to the place the bat had told him to find if he wanted to locate the girl. It was, of course, where he had lived when he had made the mistake. He went inside the old building and found the room that had been his.

Here it had all begun, or had it begun when he went to work at the Black Arts Bookstore? or when in college he had sunk himself so deeply in the arcana back in the library stacks that he had flunked out? or perhaps when as a youth he had first thrilled to the ads in yellowed copies of *Weird Tales: UNLOCK YOUR SECRET POWER. Ancient mysteries of the Pyramids revealed*, or even earlier, when on All Hallow's Eve he and some others had drawn a pentagram in yellow chalk? How old had he been then? Eight? Nine?

There had been the candles and the geometric shape drawn on the floor, and he had begun to chant *Eu-bu, Elibu, Asmodeus, deus deus stygius*—nonsense syllables of course—how could they be anything else? But they had come to him and something in his monotonous soprano had shaped them—no, fleshed them. A glove looks like a hand, thrust a hand into it and it looks the same but is not, it is a far more potent thing. Words are words—nothings—but there seemed to be that in his young chanting that filled, that fleshed, each of them. And as for the words themselves, they came to him each dictated by the last, like the cadence of pacing feet: being here, there is only one place to go next; from *Abriman* to *Satani* is somehow simply obvious, and then like hopscotch the young voice bounced on *Thanatos, Thanatos, Thanatos*. It was then that the bulge happened in the middle of the pentagram. The floor couldn't have swelled like that (it showed no signs of it later) but it did all the same, and the thin pennants of many-colored smoke and the charnel smell did happen, and the crowding feeling of -of -of Something coming up, coming in. Then goggle-eyed kids deliciously ready to be terrified were terrified, ready to scream, screamed, ready to escape, fled in a galloping synergy of wild fears—all but young Smith, who stayed to watch the plumes of smoke subside, the bulge recede ... for his chant had stopped, a panic-driven sneaker had cut the careful yellow frame of the pentagram, so that soon nothing was left but echoes of that abandoned abattoir smell and in Smith's heart a terrified yet fascinated dedication; he cried, he whispered: "It really worked ... it really worked!"

An old wives' tale once had heart-attack victims munch the leaves of the foxglove and recover. Along came science and extracted digitalis. In just this way Smith learned what it really is about bat's blood, and the special potency of the body-fat of a baby murdered and bled at the dark of the moon, and how these and many other things may be synthesized and their potency multiplied without recourse to bats or babies, stars or stumpwater, Eucharists, eunuchs or unicorn horn.

Basics are simple. The theory of solid-state electronics is complicated but the thing itself is not; the tiny block of semi-conductive germanium called transistor, nuvistor, thermistor, tunnel diode is, as any fool can

HE HAD GIVEN HIM FIRST A SERIES OF DREAMS, THEN A HUNGER TO KNOW THE CONVOLUTIONS OF BLACK MAGIC. THE HUNGER OF CURIOSITY.

see, a simple thing indeed. So it was that Smith, working his way through matters incomprehensible, indescribable, and unspeakable, came all the way through the complexities of the earnest alchemists and the many dark rituals of animists and satanists and the strangely effective religious psychology that steeps the worship of the Nameless One sometimes called the Horned God, and many others, until he reached simplicity, until he reached basics.

Simple as a transistor, as difficult to understand.

And who, using a transistor, needs to understand it?

But a transistor (however precise) without a power supply (however tiny) is useless. The runes and the bones without the runesmith ... nothing. With one, with the smith called Smith, fear more terrifying than any ever known by humankind; disaster unexpected, inexplicable, seeming random, operating on unknown logic and unleashing unknown forces.

In the hall of the seven faceless gods
Stood the incubus and the nixie
Before their masters.
Who told them
Things they needed to know.

The time has come. After time within time that has eaten time till it be gorged on its own substance, the time has come. You have been chosen to act as our emissaries. You will go and you will find us an instrument and you will train it and teach it and hone it and mold it to our needs. And when the instrument is ready you will use it to open a portal, and we will pour through and regain what was once and always ours, what was taken from us when we were exiled.

Here.
Where it is cold.
Where it is dark.
Where we receive no nourishment.
You will do this.

I am ready to serve. So am I. But what sort of weapon do you want us to get? *I think I know what they mean.* You always know what they mean, listen, Masters. I don't want to be a nuisance, but I can't work with this incubus. He's a complainer and a befuddler and he's got delusions of authority. *Masters, don't listen to him. He's jealous of the faith and trust you've put in me. He rails under the lash of envy. My success with the coven against the Norns infuriates him.* Rails? What the Thoth are you gibbering about? Look, Masters, I serve gladly; there isn't much else for me to do. But I can't work under this lunatic. One of us has to be the charge-of-things on this. If it's him, then put me on some other duty. If it's me, then put him in his place.

Silence!

You will work together as needs be.
The incubus
The nixie will be in charge of this matter
And you will assist

I serve gladly, Masters. Then why are you still foaming? *Shut up!* Darling, you're lovely when you're angry.

We will hear
No more.
You will begin now
Find
The weapon and teach it
Open the portal.
We long to return.
How you do it is your concern but.
Do not fail us.

The nixie and the incubus had worked together as well as might be expected. The nixie said, We'll give him magic and let him use it. We can't go through, not yet at least, but we can send dreams and thoughts and desires: they'll pass through the veil. *And what good will that do?*

He'll tear a rift in the veil for us. *Oh, I can't believe the stupidity of your ideas.* Stupid or not, it's the way I'm doing it; carefully and smoothly, and you keep your trachimoniae out of it. *Just don't order me about. I'm the highest ranking incubus—*

Just shut up, will you.

Shut up? How dare you speak to me like that? You'd better succeed quickly, nixie. My Principals are anxious, and if you go wrong or slow down I'll make certain they have their way with you.

The nixie had found his weapon. Smith. He had given him first a series of dreams. Then a hunger to know the convolutions of black magic. The bulge in the floor. The hunger of curiosity. Leading him, step by step, through his life: the Black Arts Bookstore, the proper volumes, the revealed secrets, the dusty little room, and at last . . . the power. But given not quite whole. Given in a twisted manner. The runes had been cast, and the mistake made—and Smith had destroyed the world, tearing the veil in the process. But not quite enough for the return of the Faceless Ones.

And the incubus grew impatient for his revenge.

The girl.

Smith was gently standing in the room to which his bat had led him. He was sorry. He hadn't meant to do it. Smith had not, in the deepest sense, known it was loaded (nor had he been meant to know); and when it went off (in this room with half a candle and dust and books bound in human flesh, and the great grimoire) it was aimed at the whole world.

Peking, Paris, Rome, Moscow, Detroit, New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles: miles of cinders burying cold roast corpses. Checkerboard arrangements of bottomless pits and glass spires. Acres of boiling swamp. Whole cities that were now curling, rising green mist. Cities and countries that had been, were totally gone.

And in the few cities that remained . . . Water no longer flowed through their veins nor electricity through their nerves, and there they sat, scraping the sky, useless, meaningless, awaiting erosion. And at their dead feet, scurrying loners and human rat-packs, survivors hunting and sometimes eating one another, a species in its glorious infancy with the umbilical cord a thousand ways pinhole-perforated before it had had a chance really to be born; and Smith knew this and had to see it all around him, had to see it and say, "My fault, My fault."

Guilty Smith the runesmith.

Back then, here, to the room where the runes had begun, to trap a girl he sensed would come. He set a noise-trap at the outer door (it opened outward so he propped a 4x4 against it and an old tin washtub under it; open the door and *whamcrash!*) and next to it a rune-trap (which cannot be described here) and he settled down to wait.

The nixie to the incubus:

What have you been doing? *I've lured him back to the focus location.* You fool! He may suspect now. *He suspects nothing. I've implanted a delusion, a girl. When he sleeps we take him and rip the*

THIS LINE WAS A CRACK IN—IN SOMETHING INCOMPREHENSIBLE. BUT IT WAS A CRACK THROUGH WHICH HIS MIND COULD PEEP AS BETWEEN BOARDS IN A FENCE.

veil completely What girl! What have you done? You can ruin it all you egomaniac! *There is no girl. A succubus. I tried earlier, but it went wrong. This time he's weaker, he'll sleep, we'll take him*

What makes you think he'll succumb this time, any more than he did the last time? *Because he's a human and he's weak and stupid and lonely and filled with guilt and he has never known love. I will give him love. Love that will drain him empty him. Then he's mine*

Not yours ... ours!

Not yours at all, mixie. The Masters will see to you.

He stood in a dark corner, waiting and sleep suddenly seemed the most important thing in the world to him. He wanted to sleep.

Sleep! Should a man live threescore years, one of them must go to this inert stupidity, a biochemical habit deriving from the accident of diurnal rotation. The caveman must huddle away behind rocks and flame during the hours of darkness because of the nocturnal predators who can see better in the dark than he can. They, in turn, must hide from him. Hence the habit, long outmoded but still inescapable. A third of a life spent sprawled out paralyzed, mostly unconscious, and oh vulnerable. Twenty years wasted out of each life, when life itself is so brief a sparkle in a surrounding immensity of nothingness. Brief as it is, still we must give away a third of it to sleep, for no real reason. Twenty years Smith had hated and despised sleep, the cruel commanding necessity for sleep, the intrusion, the interruption, the sheer waste of sleep, but never had he hated it so much as now, when everyone in the world was his enemy and all alone he must stand them off. Who would stand sentry over Smith? only Smith, lying mostly unconscious with his own lids blanding him and his ears turned off and his soft belly upward to what ever soft-footed enemy might penetrate his simple defenses

But he could not help himself, he *wanted* to sleep

He lay down fully dressed and pulled a blanket over him. He murmured his goodnight words, which for a long time had been (as he slid toward the edge of slumber's precipice and scanned the day past and the weeks and months since that first terrible rune-work), "I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. I'm sorry . ." and as he tumbled off the edge of waking, he would catch one awful glimpse of tomorrow—more of the same, but worse.

But not tonight. Perhaps it was his exhaustion, the long thirty-six-hour flight up the Empire State Building, trying, out of guilt and compassion, not to use his terrible weapon (how many times had he made that firm resolution . how many times, falling sickly asleep, had he determined to walk out unarmed, to build an attention aura around himself, to get from the new barbarians that which his guilt deserved?), or perhaps he had reached a new peak of terror and shame, and feared especially the vulnerability of sleep.

As he approached the dark tumble into oblivion, something made him claw at the edge, hold fast, neither asleep nor awake, just at that point through which he usually hurtled, unable to stay awake, on guard no more

And he heard voices

Now I send her to him. Now when he's weakest. Wait! Are you sure? This man . he's . different. There's been a change in him. *Since we last manipulated him? Don't be ridiculous.* No, wait! There is ... something. Sleep. Yes, that's it. It has to do with sleep. *I'm not wasting my Principals want through now, in this tick of time, now! I want success more than you, that is why the triumph and the rewards will be mine. The twelve generations it took to breed this Smith as a gateway and the lifetime it took to train him. It's all come down to me, to me to fail or succeed, and I'll succeed! I'm sending the succubus, now! He's never been loved . now he'll be loved.*

No! You fool! Your ego! Sleep is his strength. You have it all wrong. Nothing can harm him when he sleeps!

Success!

Smith had a brief retinal impression of *something* ... it was being a gateway, and what it was like. Mouth open till the flesh tore at the corners. Darkness pouring from within him, then flames that expanded and rolled over the land, filling the sky, and himself burning burning burning.

Then it was gone. Smith clung for one more amazed moment to this place, this delicately limned turnover point between waking and sleep. This line was a crack in—in something incomprehensible, but was it a crack through which his mind could peep as between boards in a fence.

Something began to beat in him, daring to move, hope. He quelled it quickly lest it wake him altogether and those—those *others*—know of it. Slipping, slipping, losing his clutch on this half-wakefulness, about to drop end over end into total sleep, he snatched at phrases and concepts, forcing himself to keep and remember them: twelve generations it took to breed this Smith as a gateway . lifetime it took to train

And nothing can reach him, nothing can harm him while he's asleep

Sleep

Sleep the robber, sleep the intruder, sleep the enemy—all his life he had tried to avoid it, had succumbed as little as possible, had fought to live without it. *Who had taught him that?* Why did he want to unlearn it so desperately now? And what did the doctors and poets say about sleep: surcease, strengthener, healer, knitter-up of the raveled sleeve of care. And he had sneered at them. Had he been *taught* to sneer?

He had. For *their* purposes, he had been taught. More. he had been bred for this—twelve generations, was it? And why? To be given the power to decimate humanity so that something unspeakable, something long-exiled could return to possess this world? Would it be the Earth alone, or all the planets, the galaxies, the universe? Could it be time itself? Or other sets of dimensions?

The one thing he must do is sleep. *Nothing can harm him when he sleeps.*

Then she came to him. The girl from the stairwell, alive again, a second time, or how many times back to the inky beginnings he could not even imagine? She came to him through the door, and there was no sound of crashing washtub, she came to him through the room and there was no stench and death from the rune-trap.

She came toward him, lying there, without clothes, without sound, without pain or anger, and she extended her flawless arms to him in love. The pleasure of her love swept across the room. She wanted to give herself, to give him everything, all she was and all she could be, for no other return than his love. She wanted his love, all of his love, all of him, everything, all the substance and strength of him.

He half rose to meet her, and then he knew what she was, and he trembled with the force of losing her, of destroying her, and he murmured words without vowels and a slimy darkness began to eat at her feet, her legs, her naked thighs, her torso, and she let one ghastly shriek as something took her, and her face dissolved in slime and darkness, and she was gone . and he fell back, weak

Smith the runesmith let go his shred of wakefulness and plunged joyfully into the healing depths. It was not until he awakened, rested and strong and healthily starving, that he realized fully what he had let go

Guilt

The sin was not his. He had been shaped to do what he had done. A terrible enemy had made him its instrument, its weapon. You do not accuse, condemn, imprison the murder weapon.

The runesmith, smiling (how long since?) fumbled for the skin-bag of knucklebones. He closed his eyes, his strong, clear rested eyes, and turned his rested mind to the talent (inborn) and skills (instilled) in him alone of all men ever. No jaded blind buckshot in the faces of his kind, done in anguish to stay alive, but the careful knowing, precise drawing of a bead. The location, direction, range known to Smith the weapon in ways impossible to Smith the man.

The knucklebones spilled chatteringly on the floor

Continued on page 116

Deep in the Woods of Gr

By Michael Swanwick
Illustrations by Mona Caron

The Village

The village of Moonglimmer-by-the-Oak was so small it could easily fit within an abandoned shoe. And so it did. The shoe lay half-buried in the loam of the woods, and its brittle leather uprights served as the walls for the tiny community.

The inhabitants of the village were what the Italians call *populo minuto*—"little people" not in terms of size but of their aspirations. They farmed fungi on the undersides of oak leaves, milked aphids, chopped straw for their wee fires, and were content.

One day a giant, mad with jealousy for their minute size, descended upon Moonglimmer-by-the-Oak, intent upon its destruction. With a mighty blow he smashed the town hall to flinders. Laughing, he kicked in the church.

But while others screamed and ran, one brave little crofter climbed to the very tip of the shoe's tongue and shot an arrow made from the sting of a honeybee right into the ravager's eye.

The poison went straight to the giant's heart. Down he fell, flattening a barn and killing six aphids.

Though it was later hushed up in court, this is the true story of how Tom Thumb died.

The Hero

In the darkest, most unwholesome part of the woods was a cairn of stones twice the height of a man. To this rode a knight, a dragon's head lashed to his saddle. He was guided by a carrion-crow. The crow would fly ahead and perch on an empty branch, wait for the knight to catch up, and then fly ahead again.

"Is this the place?" the knight asked when he reached the cairn.

"Aye," said the crow. "And here is what the spirit of the cairn told me: Climb to the top of the cairn and drink of a dragon's blood, and you'll be made immortal—or as close to immortal as can be in this world."

The knight had dismounted and was untying the dragon's head. Now he stopped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you'll still be vulnerable to cold steel. Age, poison, or disease, however, will never diminish your strength."

"I can protect myself from a man with a sword," the knight said. And with one

Seven tales from the enchanted forest.

ammarie...

canny blow of his own sword, Sansremorse, he slew his horse. For that was the price the crow had required of him. He climbed to the top of the cairn. He lifted high the dragon's head. He drank deep of its black and bitter blood.

There was a shifting and a looseness then, as if all the world were sloughing off its skin. The knight fell to his knees, and then to his belly. A scaly dryness overcame him. A cold and jaundiced outlook. A fiery strength.

"You tricked me!" the newmade dragon cried. Without thinking, he coiled around and around the cairn. He could sense the golden treasure at its core, and knew within his heart of hearts that it was his destiny to guard it forevermore.

"Always read the fine print," the crow said complacently. "You're immortal now, just as I promised. It's not my fault you didn't ask enough questions."

The erstwhile knight rattled his useless wings in rage and despair. "But why, why, why?"

"The spirit of the cairn laid a geas upon me to find it a guardian," said the carrion-crow. "I have found one, and now I am free. Besides—" he hopped onto the corpse of the knight's murdered mount—"I dearly love the taste of horse flesh."

The Wolf

There once was a poor girl who lived by the edge of the woods. Oh, but she was a tough cookie! Once a week, on Sundays, she took a basket of food to her Granny who lay perpetually dying in a cottage in a clearing. It did not bother her one whit that her path led her through the darkest part of the forest. It was there she met the wolf.

Now, wolves in fairy tales are not like wolves in the real world. Their skulls are filled with silver—you can see the light of it in their eyes—and they can speak just as any gentleman. "Good day," said the wolf with a flash of his teeth. "Whither bound, fair morsel, so unprotected and far from home?"

"To visit my Granny," replied the girl, as bold as brass, "in her wee little cottage at the heart of the woods."

"And when you get there, what will you do?"

"I'll go into her bedroom which, because she keeps the drapes drawn, is almost lightless. I'll take off all my clothes and climb into her big, shadowy bed. Invisible under the covers, I'll rub my body against hers to warm her up. Sometimes it takes hours," said the brazen young hussy. "But, oh my, is it dark! A stranger could slip in there ahead of me, and I'd never know until it was too late."

All the while she spoke, the girl stared deeply into the silvery light of the wolf's eyes. Her meaning couldn't have been clearer.

So the wolf slipped away and ran ahead to the wee little cottage. When he got there, he strangled the Granny and threw the corpse behind the woodpile. Then he leaped into her great, shadowy bed. He tried not to salivate with anticipation. He tried not to pant.

When the girl arrived at her Granny's cottage, she entered the bedroom without knocking. Lingeringly, she undressed. The wolf, for all his keen eyesight, could see her only vaguely. But he could hear each item of clothing as it slid to the floor. He could smell her warm flesh exposed to the air. She slid into the bed and under the covers, exactly as she had said.

But when the wolf made a grab for the girl, she brought up a knife he hadn't been able to see in her hand, and gutted

him from crotch to sternum"

After the girl had cleaned off the blood and gotten dressed again, she took an axe and split open the wolf's skull. All the silver coins inside (and this was her plan from the start) came spilling out into her hands.

The silver made the poor girl rich, and the wolf's pelt made her a fine riding cape. Her Granny's corpse she left behind the woodpile. She'd never much liked the old bat.

This is a story famous throughout the woods and for leagues beyond. Even today, if you go there on a Sunday, you'll see girls hurrying through the forest, baskets in hand, with their hearts pounding and their eyes bright. Hoping for wolves.

The Witch

The essence of a witch is wrongness. Sometimes it's subtle, something you can't quite put your finger on. Other times, it makes you run to call the police.

Deep in the forest, there lived a witch. She had a clockwork garden where pocket watches grew on vines, and a gingerbread house with paintings by Geiger and Francis Bacon on the walls. She used to live with another woman, and nobody knew quite what to make of that. Then, without warning, the woman disappeared—and nobody knew what to make of that either.

One day, a promising young man with hair the color of straw went out to seek his fortune. He was virtuous and kind, and his two older brothers had gone before him and died on the road, so he thought his chances were pretty good.

En route, the young man had the usual three encounters. He gave his lunch to a starving wolf, untangled a hawk from a fowling net, and saved a snake from being trampled by a horse. They were magic animals, all, and each one promised its help in need. Everything was right on track. The young man's heart was light as light.

Then he heard the sound of a cuckoo clock where none belonged. He plunged into the woods to investigate, and found the witch's garden. She was there on her knees, harvesting Rolexes, when first he saw her. Hours she stood and brushed the dirt from her dress (only she yacked into the hut's doorway).

"Come in, young man, come in," she crooned. She offered him a cup of tea. She buttered him a scone. She pulled his pants down to his knees and tied him to her bed.

They did things together for a long, long time.

That night, while the witch slept, the magic wolf scratched at the door. "Leap on my back," it said, "and I'll carry you away."

"No," the young man said. "Not yet, anyway. Maybe tomorrow."

The next night the magic hawk came fluttering at the windowsill. "Slip out the back door," it said, "and when the witch comes chasing after you, I'll fly in her face and blind her with my talons and beak."

The young man shed a bitter tear, and turned away. "Too late, too late!" he cried. "I cannot bring myself to leave."

The third night the magic snake slid under the door and into the bedroom, and coiled itself around and around the young man's thigh. "Remember the quest!" it whispered into his ear. "Three hard challenges, and at the end: A tidy resolution, a kingdom as neat as a pin, and a vanilla princess to rule over it with. Come away now, while you still can!"

The witch, who had never *really* been asleep, reached out a hand to stroke the snake. Her eyes glittered in the night. "He doesn't want any of that," she said. "He only felt he should because that's what he was always told." Then, lowering her voice, "Stay with us. Every morning I'll feed you a saucer of milk, and at night we'll find a place for you in our little games."

And so the snake did.

The essence of a witch is wrongness. But sometimes, that's what we crave.

The Moon

The Man in the Moon, as is well known, leaves the sky once a year to wander the earth. So when a farm wife, coming home late from a quilting bee, saw a great light in the woods and the shadows of the trees bouncing up and down to the gait of a walking man, she knew at once what it meant, and hurried to tell her husband.

Thus it was that the farmer was waiting in his doorway when the Man-in-the-Moon came strolling down the road, clothed in gray, with a scarf like a purple cloud thrown about his neck and a wide-brimmed hat gray as a thunderstorm upon his head. When the farmer invited him inside to play cards, the smile that split that big man's face was as wide as all creation.

For a time, the Man-in-the-Moon prospered. He won three pigs and the sty to keep them in, two geldings and a mare, a milch cow, all the hay in the farmer's barn, and the great blue delft platter that hung over the chimney as well.

But as the night grew old, the Man in the Moon's fortunes dwindled. He lost every penny of what he had won. His face grew pale and wan.

"What'll you bet?" the farmer chortled, when he had the last fat silver coin from the Moon-Man's purse. "What'll you bet to stay in the game?"

"My scarf." The Man-in-the-Moon unwrapped it from his neck. "Its wool was spun by Eve from the fleece of Eden's sheep and dyed with sunsets rendered down until only the deepest purples remained." He laid it upon the table and lost it the very next hand.

"Don't quit now!" the farmer whooped. "Put up a surfeit, stay in the game!"

"I'll wager my hat," said the Man in the Moon. "It's older than Time and yet newer than tomorrow morning. Father Odin himself wore it back before his fall."

He lost that as well.

"Don't stop, don't stop!" the farmer crowed. "Surely you have something else."

"My fame, my home, my station," the Man-in-the-Moon said, "and my very identity as well. Everything I have will I wager against all that I have lost."

"Done!" cried the farmer, and laid his hand down with a flourish. Softly, the Man-in-the-Moon said, "You have won."

So the farmer put on the Man-in-the-Moon's scarf and the Man-in-the-Moon's great hat. He stuck the Man-in-the-Moon's purse in his belt. Then he took on the Man-in-the-Moon's aspect. Bright shone his face. Great swelled his belly. Without word of farewell, he went out the door and up the road. Higher and higher he climbed into the sky until he had achieved his new estate.

There he stayed.

Meanwhile, he who had formerly been the Man-in-the-Moon took the woman by the hand and led her off to bed. In the morning, he set about doing the chores that, if one lives on a farm, are always there to be done.

So it was that the farm wife lost one husband and gained another. And if her new spouse was not the most constant of men, if his affections waxed and waned with the moon .. well, in this he was not so different from his predecessor.

The Beanstalk

Of all the ne'er-do-wells in the world, Jack was the worst. He stole pies from windowsills where they'd been left to cool. He drank and smoked and told dirty jokes. He spray-painted obscenities on railroad trestles. When his aged mother told him to sell the family cow at the fair, he traded it for a handful of beans.

How that virtuous crone howled when she learned what he had done! She threw the beans out the window and tried to stab him with a pair of scissors. Jack had to sleep in the barn that night.

Come morning, the beans had grown into a giant beanstalk that climbed all the way into the sky. Jack, who was always ready for anything so long as it wasn't honest work, set his cap at a rakish angle and began to climb. By noon he was so high that his mother's farm looked as small as a postage stamp in the woods below. Not long after, he reached the top.

The cloud-country was inhabited by a race of giants as unwary and insubstantial as the clouds themselves. It took no time at all for a rogue like Jack to rob them blind. With a sackful of magic thus and golden that slung over his shoulder, he scuttled back home.

Hardly had his feet touched ground, though, when his mother shrieked and pointed upward. High above, dark as a thunderhead, a cloud-giant was clambering down toward them, intent upon revenge.

Quick as a flash, Jack seized an axe and chopped down the beanstalk. The giant fell slowly, like a cloud descending to the earth. When he hit the ground, he broke into mists and rainbows, leaving Jack and his dear old hag of a mother to live happily ever after.

That's what they told the constable, at any rate, when he came asking after the source of their sudden wealth. The constable didn't think much of their story. But since the neighbors were all afraid to testify otherwise, he had to accept it.

The Unicorn

Not all girls wish they were a princess. Some are unlucky enough to be born one. *Noblesse oblige* entails more than just marrying whatever lout can nail your father's three impossible tasks. Sometimes it means being offered up as a sacrifice to a rapacious, lubricious beast.

Such was the fate of Princess Archangelica. Meek and mild, obedient to a fault, virginal despite real temptation, she nevertheless found herself at the dark, dank heart of the woods at midnight being, for reasons of state, chained to a tree.

Stiff with outrage, the princess said, "This is strange courtesy, my father. What offense have I given to be treated so?"

"None," the king, her father, admitted. He coughed and then added, "But the Dread Beast ravages our lands and, so the sages say, can only be assuaged by innocence."

He wiped a tear from his eye.

Then he stood close and pressed a misericord into her hand. One arm had been left free and now he murmured into her ear the reason why. "When the moment comes ... if the pain is too great .. plunge this into your heart, so that none may say that one of royal blood showed fear. Do you understand?"

"Aye," the princess said. And, her face as savage as any demon's, she stabbed upward, through the king's eye and into his brain.

Not long after the king's men had fled in horror, taking his body with them, the unicorn came to receive his sacrifice.

This was not the milk-gentle, goat-bearded unicorn of which dainty lies were told in urban courts, but the archaic war unicorn recorded in the ancient bestiaries, he whose body was red in places and elsewhere white, whose head was blue and whose horn was black. All fiery were his eyes and steam came white from his nostrils. But whether his tail was like unto a boar's and his feet those of an elephant as Pliny asserts, or else were both those of a wild ass as according to Ctesias, Princess Archangelica could not tell. For she was lost in the savage splendor of those eyes.

Regicide and patricide though she was, Archangelica was unashamed of herself. A young woman may be, by dint of will, an exemplar of all Christian virtues, and yet have depths and potentials that would give a berserker pause. In that long, still instant, Archangelica recognized a soulmate. In that same heartbeat, the unicorn discovered a spirit as ruthless as his own.

Wordlessly, an understanding was achieved and a deal was struck.

Thus was born the legend of the Brigand Princess. People say that the innocent, the virtuous, and the pure at heart have nothing to fear from Archangelica and her unearthly steed. They will never be found run through by the unicorn's great horn or trampled under his adamantine hooves.

So they say, but—no offense intended—if I were you, I'd stay out of those woods tonight. ❧

FROM COMICS TO COMMERCIAL WORK TO FINE ART, JEFFREY JONES HAS TAKEN US—AND HIMSELF—ON A DARING ARTISTIC JOURNEY.

THE PLEASURES OF

AMBIGUITY

HE COULD HAVE BEEN A PRE-RAPHAELITE PRINCE—OR PRINCESS—TRAPPED in a life rendered by Aubrey Beardsley. A black-and-white photo portrait of the young artist shows a beautiful, haunted face etched by sensitivity, framed by a dark Byronesque mane of hair, and like some [illegible] with his way from darkness to the light.

He was born into Southern [illegible] a [illegible] a [illegible] covers of books, cartooning, and art schools, [illegible] didn't remain hidden for long. Genius [illegible]

Many a talent artist has hoisted the [illegible] blazing fire. Award-winning filmmakers speak [illegible] of Jones's work. "Jeffrey has made some things possible for me," said Rick Berry, "poem visits, telepathy from the stars, sonic tender and incredible yearnings for heartbreaking beauty and awe—I was reaching for the things Jeffrey's work pointed the way." Jones has fans all over the world. One writes [illegible] reveals: "He has a knack for drawing one into his paintings and the mood of his subjects [illegible] and then, just as you're [illegible] story about just that one."

BY KAREN HABER

He was born in Georgia in 1944, and wanted to be a scientist when he grew up. He set out to study geology but by the time he landed in New York City in 1967 he was looking for work as an artist. With a wife and child to support, he took any jobs he could get, beginning with comics and fanzines. In time, those led to paperback covers and book illustration.

In the sixties, art directors were clamoring for the "next" Frank Frazetta. After Jones ably painted the dust jacket and frontispiece for *I Am A Barbarian* by Edgar Rice Burroughs, he found himself in demand, and proved that he could ably depict the action, muscularity, and exoticism that the market required. But it wasn't long before he stepped out of Frazetta's penumbra and began to cast some shadows of his own. By 1969 his work had begun to display a looser, painterly quality whose muted colors summoned the ghosts of master illustrators Howard Pyle, N.C. Wyeth, and their colleagues.

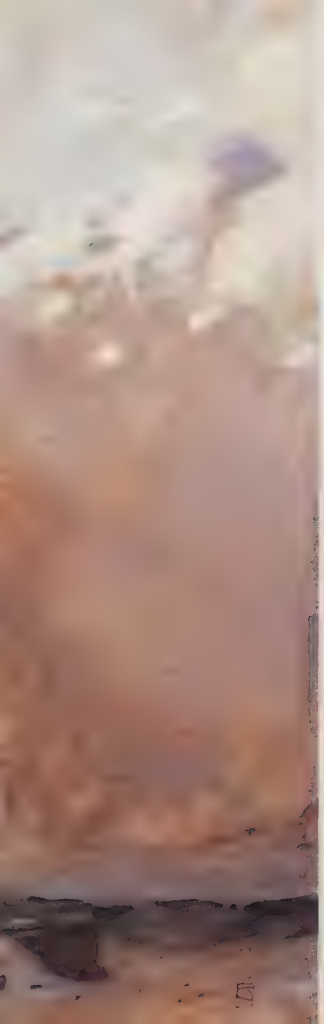
Says Brom: "In the footsteps of Wyeth, Pyle, and the Brandywine school, Jones has kept alive the grand tradition of American illustration as art."

The artist who has launched a hundred others upon their own artistic odysseys is remarkably unimpressed by his own work and openly says so. "As I said on the back of one of my trading cards: 'If I am lucky all my triumphs will go unremembered until the end.' This is of course extreme, but the last thing I need is for me to think I've done something great... Yes, I enjoy it when people like my work, because I want to have added something to this world, or whatever gave me life, instead of just taking from it. Every work, hopefully, will leave me unsatisfied. This drives me on to the next one. As soon as I think I've done something great it'll all be over."

How did an artist whose early influences were Hal Foster, Mort Drucker, Frank Frazetta, and Roy Krenkel come to a parting of the ways with cartooning and illustration?

I see commercial illustration as immoral, for the same reason music videos are immoral. It's a thief. It robs the reader of his imagination by either showing him ahead of time what something's going to look like—therefore not allowing his imagination to run free—or by contesting his imagination if he's formed an opinion before coming to the picture. Then he has to have a fight with the art."

"I SEE COMMERCIAL ILLUSTRATION AS IMMORAL FOR THE SAME REASON MUSIC VIDEOS ARE IMMORAL. IT'S A THIEF. IT ROBS A READER OF HIS IMAGINATION..."

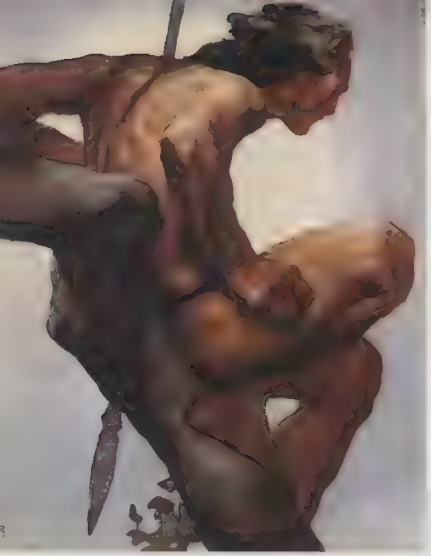


CENTER Mummy was originally painted in 1976 for a puzzle company.

LEFT An untitled personal work circa 1980

BELOW The cover painting for Nine Princes in Amber by Roger Zelazny 1972

PREVIOUS SPREAD (right) An untitled personal work circa 2001. (left) An untitled personal work circa 1998



ABOVE Tarzan Rescues the Moon, *painted for the 1998 Edgar Rice Burroughs calendar*

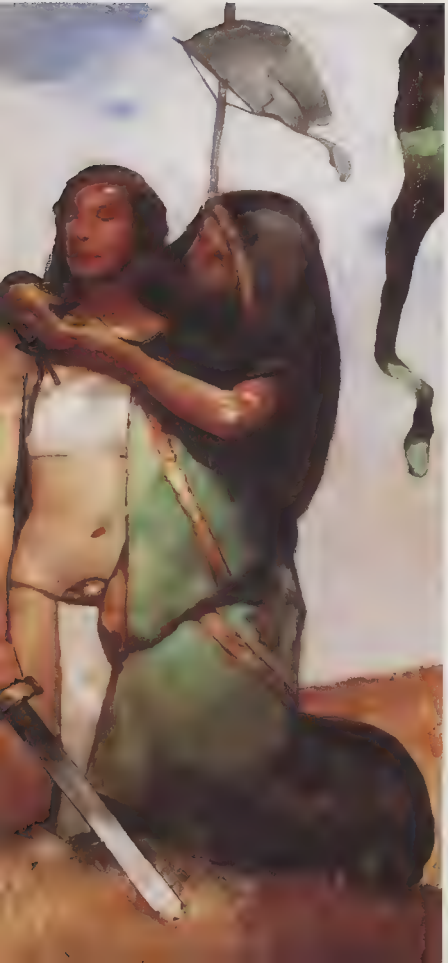
CENTER Guardian of Dragons, *a circa 2000 personal work*

FAR RIGHT Cover painting *for the first edition of Fritz Leiber's* Swords and Deviltry, *1976*

He deliberately minimizes the legendary three years he spent renting an art studio—dubbed "The Studio"—with M. W. Kaluta, Barry Windsor-Smith, and Bernie Wrightson. When asked about it, he recalls attempts to find the place of its rodent infestation rather than artistic cross-pollination. Despite the enshrinement of that time and those artists in Roger Dean's Dragons Dream Press *The Studio* (1979), Jones gives it barely a nod as he moves along his artistic path.

People have romanticized the whole thing because of the book. Some think we're like the Beatles or some stupid thing like that. The Beatles at least sang a song together. We never really did anything together at all, except fight over a book that came out of a studio that was never planned in the first place.

Ambiguity is a continual motif in his work and life. His now-classic, charmingly peculiar comic strip, "Idyll," is a good example of Jones reveling in creating artistic enigmas. With its exquisite linework, masterful use of negative space, and sardonic nonsequiturs masked as dialogue, the unique strip eschews narrative and artistic convention, embodying Jones's "never complain, never explain" attitude.



Jones doesn't seem concerned about his artistic legacy. What is more important to him is the process, the journey itself, the experience of creating art.

"As long as I can remember I've been in love with drawing. I love the silver-gray line that comes off the end of a pencil. I love the sound a pencil makes on a sheet of paper. I love the feel of painted wood in my fingers.

"When I draw, I 'dream' the drawing. What I mean by this is that it unfolds before me part by part, a drama. I rarely have an idea of the outcome. Whether this is deliberate or not I don't know, but I do know that being aware of the ending takes the joy out of drawing.

"I use 'dream' in the dictionary sense—imagine as possible.' The picture becomes possible for me and the things in the picture tell their story to me. And I talk in return with the pencil. The picture and I have a rapport and something is arrived at.

Continued on page 114

Strings

Let me tell you this: I never even *liked* Orpheus. You should never believe what you read in mythology. The stories are true—of course, at least in part. But they're written down by the fallible, translated by the inept, perpetuated by people with axes to grind. And told by men.

So if you teach classics, or if you care about the truth in any way at all, tell your children this—Eurydice didn't love Orpheus for all eternity.

In fact, I hated him.

Picture this: I'm fourteen. The whole village, the whole nation, is enthralled by the musical skills of Orpheus. Whatever I feel for him now, I have to concede that his talent was every bit as magical as the myth said. And I was the prettiest girl in the region, food for heroes, or so I thought.

You might have heard I was a dryad or a nymph. I think something was lost in the translation, because I was—am—a mortal. But it probably seemed less glamorous to have the fabulously talented son of Apollo and Calliope drooling after a merchant's daughter, pretty or not, so in retelling I have been part-deified. Or perhaps it was the olive trees. Yes, I did spend a lot of time with those trees, because my family's livelihood depended on them.

When a demigod just won't take no for an answer, sometimes a girl has to take matters into her own hands.

By Karen Traviss • Illustration by Stephen Johnson

Orpheus, luring humans and animals and even rocks with his lyre, glanced briefly at me in the *agora* and I did indeed feel like a goddess for a few moments. Then he glanced away again.

He went on playing a slow cascade of pure notes that trickled like water down the scale. I felt the sounds deep in my body like a missed heartbeat, as if it would never beat again; and yet it did, and it seemed to beat to the slow rhythm of his music. It left a yearning void in my chest but it was not unpleasant or frightening, merely a longing like recalling a happy time long gone. I could have held it in me forever.

Everyone in the *agora* had stopped what they were doing. A woman in a grubby yellow gown paused while tying bunches of green chick-pea pods; two men haggling loudly over a bolt of dalmatic cloth fell silent at exactly the same time as the grasshoppers and bees did. The notes hung in the still, hot air.

The world stopped for Orpheus. It always did.

He plucked away at the strings, staring down at them as if oblivious of the fact that he had suspended time, and then stopped and looked up. A second of absolute silence, and then everyone clapped and laughed, and he had the grace to bow his head and grin. My heart resumed its normal rhythm. Market-day life in the *agora* could continue again. Even the scrubby wild thyme tumbling from the walls, tempted a few hand-spans forward by his music, appeared to recede again like a tide.

My friend Metis giggled and lowered her voice, evidently unable to stop staring at Orpheus, who was now surrounded by adoring women from little girls to grandmothers in black. "Isn't he wonderful? Isn't he just everything you've ever longed for?"

I had to admit she was right. That music was irresistible, and so was he. He had something about him, something beyond being a young man, and I glanced at him hoping for another look from him. And I got it, and my day had meaning. It was the kind of magic you could work if your mother was a muse. But it was the kind of magic that an oil-merchant's daughter, even a pretty one, could only observe.

There was another girl watching him intently. When she turned to watch him pass, I saw she was heavily pregnant, weeping quietly, and I thought she was about to approach him for something. But he didn't even look at her. She watched him go and wandered off into the market.

A few days later they found a pregnant woman dead at the foot of the cliffs. I wondered if it was her. I never asked.

I admit I had a crush on Orpheus. Everyone—*everything*—did. On market days Metis and I would stand near the front of the rapt crowd—not *at* the front, you understand, nothing so forward—to get a better look as Orpheus played. I was as mesmerized as anyone by the beautiful, shivering liquid notes of the lyre, but to this day I can't actually recall any of the tunes.

He stopped and we all resumed living again, bathed in a wonderful sensation of euphoric warmth and half-formed happy memories. Then he walked slowly and deliberately over to me and the group of women around me parted like grain. "Today it's you I play for," he said. "You deserve my music."

He put his hand carefully against the side of my face. Yes, I know: it was breathtakingly arrogant. I should have slapped him. I would have, had I been the woman that I am now. But I didn't. I *couldn't*. The music built up every time I heard it and slowly bathed away almost every doubt, every fear, every thought that wasn't him. But I could still see that pregnant girl, and I wondered if she would have my own face one day.

He bowed his head and grinned, and walked back through the women while pausing to look them over. He focused on me once more. "We shall be together," he said.

If you'd heard we had eyes only for each other, you were very much mistaken.

It was autumn and the olives were ripe enough to beat from the trees. We gathered them up in baskets, some for curing in lye and some for crushing into oil, great tubs of green and gold and purple-black fruits. It was a family day. My mother and father, my grandmother and my brothers Bulis and Dymnos sat down on the scrubby grass, sap-stained and tired after harvesting, and shared a celebratory meal of bread, garlic, and the very first oil pressings.

I wanted to finish it quickly. I had arranged to meet Orpheus later, without my father's knowledge, in case he stopped me from seeing him. Whose father would forbid his daughter from consorting with a demigod? Mine. "Too rich for your blood," he had warned me. "If you upset him, we'll all suffer."

But I didn't care. I didn't even recall the weeping pregnant girl who had thrown herself from the cliff. *Please, meal, end now. Let me go. Let me go to Orpheus.*

I felt it before I saw it.

I jumped up, squealing in pain; I thought I had disturbed a bee because the stinging sensation in my ankle was anonymous and sharp. But it was a snake, a little brown snake, and although my brothers chased it with sticks, it escaped into a crevice in the stony hillside. Our neighbor Arsteaus abandoned his sheep to rush to my aid. The breath felt as if it was being crushed from my chest like oil from the olives as the shepherd carried me back to the village to find the physician. After that, I recall little.

You will note, I hope, that I was not dancing for joy in a meadow after my marriage to Orpheus when the snake struck. Nor was Arsteaus the villain whose unwanted sexual attentions made me flee into the path of the snake. He was just a kind old man who tried to save my life. How could legend have portrayed him so cruelly—or set me as Orpheus's bride? The problem with history, with legends, is that the first version that's told tends to stick in the collective mind. There is no point demanding a right of reply.

I'm told I was raving and semiconscious for days, and nobody expected me to live. My family had even started making preparations for my funeral rites. But I lived. I woke one day to find my mother standing over me in her pale lavender *chiton*, smiling, scented with cooking herbs, clapping her hands together in obvious joy—but I couldn't hear the claps. She spoke. And although I could see her lips moving, I could hear absolutely nothing she said.

I was deaf.

As friends told me later, it was a small price to pay for surviving the snake's venom. Its poison sometimes had that effect, they said. I admit that it was frightening to be a baby again, learning to understand speech anew, but I made my brothers mouth words at me for hours until I was sure I could understand most of what was said to me. I was just glad to be alive.

There was a posy of dried flowers left for me on the steps of our house. I knew it was from Orpheus, although I didn't dare tell my father. I dreamed of meeting him secretly again.

When I was deemed fully fit, my mother let me go out to the *agora* with Metis, with a few coins so I could treat myself to some thyme-scented honeycomb. If she told Metis to keep a special eye on me due to my handicap, I was in no position to hear it. That can make you very suspicious. It's easy to imagine that everyone is concealing things from you when you can't hear

But we enjoyed ourselves at the *agora* and wandered from stall to stall, dripping honey down our chins and dresses as we broke off chunks of the honeycomb I had bought.

"Look," said Metis, accompanying her words with an exaggerated pointing gesture. "Orpheus is going to play." As soon as she said it, I could see that she regretted it, and I read her lips shape the words, "I'm sorry."

I would no longer be able to share the communal rapture as Orpheus played his lyre to the crowd. It was a shame, but I reminded myself that I still had my looks and my life, and that Orpheus was still my sweetheart and had proved it with his gift. I watched him in the way you watch someone very familiar to you but who doesn't know you're looking at them, taking in the movement and the detail of his blond hair and his extravagant wrist movement as he plucked at the strings. It was like watching a loved one sleeping.

But my attention began to wander. It had never done that before, not while Orpheus was there.

The crowd appeared to freeze. There was something unnerving about seeing people standing slack-jawed and immobile around a—around a skinny, frizzy-haired youth with a thick-bridged nose and more than a few pimples on his chin and forehead. The realization hit me like cold water. I stared because I had never noticed them before. I was so fascinated and appalled by this imperfection that I stepped forward.

Orpheus was not as wrapped up in his performance as I had thought. As soon as I moved, he looked up. But his fingers continued their silent progress along the strings of his lyre. *Nobody* so much as twitched a muscle during his recitals. I'd swear he was shocked.

And when his eyes met mine, the sky didn't explode in shooting stars. All I felt was embarrassment at being caught staring at his spots. It clearly troubled him, too, because as I backed away, trying to melt back into the oblivious crowd, his eyes kept darting between the lyre and me as if he could not believe what was happening.

He stopped playing. The crowd fragmented, woken, surprised. "Hey!" he mouthed at me. "Don't go! Come back."

And he got up to come after me, but I ran. I think I was running from reality, not from him. Deafness had freed me from a spell.

I didn't love Orpheus at all. I knew that now.

My mother caught my face in both her hands and forced me to look at her.

"Orpheus is here again," she mouthed, agitated. "He asks to see you. Won't you just talk to him?"

It was the third time Orpheus had come to my father's house and sat outside playing his lyre. Between tunes he threw stones at our door and at our goats. My father was furious; but he didn't dare tell the son of a god to clear off, and took out his anger on me with a switch instead. I would run the family, he told me. I deserved what I got. He would drag me out to Orpheus and disown me if I didn't appease the boy.

My mother said nothing, but she did block my father from the doorway the next time he tried to shout silent insults at me.

Bulls came running in, gleeful. "Orpheus is lovesick," he said. I missed a few words because he was prancing around, his face turned away from me. "... just sitting there, pining for you."

If it had been anyone else pining outside our door, I would have grabbed up my cloak and given him an audience. But Orpheus ... I had seen the pimples, the flaws, the artful self-conscious conceit in his musical gifts, and I was afraid, both of his menacing persistence and the end of my illusion. Without his heart-stopping tunes, he was nothing.

"Tell him to go away," I said. I could feel my voice in my skull but I had no idea if I were whispering or talking loud enough for him to hear. I didn't care. Metis was outraged by my lack of gratitude. "You're being pursued by the son of a *god*. The son of a muse."

"I don't care for him," I said.

But Orpheus, I found, wasn't experienced at taking no for an answer.

I was down in the olive groves, collecting broken branches for firewood after an overnight storm, when I felt a hand on my shoulder and smelled unfamiliar sweat. When I turned, it wasn't my father.

"Are you following me?" I demanded.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," said Orpheus. "I just wanted to know why you won't see me. What have I done to you?"

I stared into his ordinary face. No, I felt nothing for him, and I missed that heady sensation and longed to recreate it. I couldn't

"Be careful of that one. **He's the kind who wants only what he can't have. You won't find it** easy to turn down the son of a god."

"I just don't love you anymore. I can't even hear your music. Leave me alone."

He still had his lyre. He grabbed it to his chest and for a moment I thought he was going to strike me with it, not play it. But he played. I could see it. He stopped, stared, and twanged the strings hard and they blurred with each blow.

"You really don't want me, do you?" He seemed amazed. "Don't I mean anything? Aren't I handsome enough for you?"

It was a stupid moment. I answered. "No. You're not handsome at all."

His face changed. I tightened my grip on a particularly heavy branch, ready to swing it. He *had* frightened me, and he was still frightening me. It was the intent expression on his face, not that of a disappointed suitor, but the fixed stare of someone teetering on the edge of unpredictable anger. When you're deaf, you can't avoid concentrating on people's faces. "I have no idea why you're pursuing me. You could have any girl in the country."

"You walked away. You weren't affected by my music."

"I can't be. I'm deaf."

I was half expecting him to say that he wanted me because I wouldn't be swept up purely by his music, that I would love him for what he was. But he didn't. "Nobody walks away from me," he said. He suddenly turned and walked a few steps, and then he swung round; if he had been talking as he walked, I would-

n't have known. "Every woman wants me, sooner or later. So will you."

I felt someone brush close to me and I knew why he had decided to walk away at that moment. Arisaeus had come to check that I was all right. Orpheus stared at him and then left. The shepherd stood by me until he was out of sight.

"Be careful of that one," Arisaeus said, taking my arm like a protective grandfather still trying to pretend he had the strength to defend his family. "He's the kind who wants only what he can't have. You won't find it easy to turn down the son of a god."

Like I said, you can never trust myth. Or history, come to that, because they're much the same thing: they're written by the victor. After a few weeks Orpheus gave up sitting outside my father's house and lobbing stones. He dominated my life, every thought I had was colored by the dread of him and what he would do, so much so that even when my father dragged me to the door by my hair I would not go outside.

But I had to go on living, and I had work to do. Sooner or later I had to face the village and the gossip. It was my fault this had happened. My father was right.

I walked down to the spring one morning and found a severed ram's head propped on a rock, trailing a stream of dried dark blood, and I knew who had put it there. The dread gripped me again.

Unlike you who never see the true shape of the meat you eat, we were used to seeing animal heads. I don't care for them myself, eyes or not, but my brothers would fight over them at the table. But this was not an abandoned delicacy. It was a message: an escalated threat, a more serious one than thrown stones. I looked around. Deaf or not, I would have sensed someone creeping up on me, but there was nobody there. I filled my water jugs, glancing over my shoulder and then almost ran back home, slopping ice-cold water down my robe as I went, breath catching in my throat.

You cannot refuse the son of a god.

I wondered if Arisaeus was going deaf with age.

There were a few more rams' heads at the spring in the weeks that followed, and the feeling that someone was a few strides behind me when I went walking without Metis or my brothers for company. They were the only ones who talked to me anymore. It was as if my constant fear was contagious. I had rituals before I could leave the house, checking after every ten steps that there was nobody behind me. My life had stopped for Orpheus as surely as if I could hear his music again, but it was not the delightful pause of time that I had once wished would last forever.

I found myself slipping into the silence. I began to wonder what my voice sounded like beyond the vibration in my own head.

It was market day and the smell of charring lamb would have guided me to the *agora* even if I hadn't known every step of the way. I would stop and see if they were selling the tiny shanks smothered in sage and rue. It was a rare treat. When I got to the market, the crowds were unnaturally still.

Of course. Orpheus the maestro, Orpheus the irresistible, was giving one of his carefully impromptu recitals, one foot on an overturned amphora. Nausea swept over me and my scalp and throat prickled hot with panic. I had to get away. Even with so many people there, he could hurt me, men, women, children, and goats stood facing forward as if awaiting a revelation. They would never be able to come to my aid. Grease from those flute-sized shanks spilled down my gown. I backed away and then turned to run.

If I thought I was the only living thing able to move freely while Orpheus played, I was wrong. Two young men were walking toward me. It was all wrong. Orpheus was playing. They should have been frozen. But they started to quicken their pace, staring at me and nobody else.

I didn't recognize them. They could have been from a distant village. But I started to run faster even before I thought about it.

How could they manage to move against the music?

Should I have tried to scream for help? You'd be amazed how hard it is to scream when you're terrified. And who would have heard, or answered, when they were pinned down by the music? I ran. I choked in silence.

I ran through Arisaeus's pastures, but he wasn't there. His sheep and goats scattered. His yellow dog barked and whined and made as if to chase me, but he was a loyal dog, and stayed with his flock. I should have run home. But it was too far, and I was blind with panic, as well as deaf. I ran without a plan, without thought, but I headed for the bay where I thought I would find fishermen mending nets.

Eventually I reached the edge of the cliffs, and I skidded to a halt. The men were jogging after me, almost leisurely, because they must have known I would either collapse or simply have nowhere left to go.

They faced me, smiling. "Come, little one." They held out their arms, blocking both sides of me. "Our master requests your presence. Orpheus commands his chosen one to come to him."

I glanced behind me. I couldn't see the beach, but I knew it was a sheer drop. There was the sea beneath. "No!" I thought I was screaming, perhaps I was mouthing silently like them, too. "No! No!"

"You didn't think Orpheus would let a defective like you snub him, did you?" said the taller of the two. He poked his finger in his ear as if cleaning it, but he pulled out a wad of something straw-colored, then another wad from his other ear. So that was how they resisted the irresistible, how they managed to walk away from the music.

The shorter one shifted from foot to foot, then lunged forward.

I looked down at the cliff edge. It was a moment of insanity, but I was suddenly an animal, all instinct, no reason. If they took me, there was pain and unending misery ahead. I could stand no more devouring by fear.

I jumped.

Death is never as you expect it. If that sounds foolish, remember how detailed my people expect our afterlife to be. We know who we will meet, what they will ask and expect of us, and how we must behave. I still thought the two men were right behind me, even though I was walking in a misty grove and it was so gray and leached of color that I thought the time was just before dawn.

But I was dead, and I was free of Orpheus and his thugs. For a few moments I was euphoric. And even when the joy began to fade, I started to feel more like the self I had once been.

I was standing on a riverbank. There were ripples on the surface of the water so I knew a small boat was approaching. Its black prow stabbed through the mist and there was a man shape in it pulling at oversized oars. It drew level with me, and the oarsman heaved the oars on board. I knew he was speaking from the movement of his head, beckoning me, but a hood obscured his face so I couldn't hear him. I did not expect to still be deaf. I thought they

sorted that out in the afterlife

He paused and then flung back the charcoal fabric.

"I said, are you still here? No coin?" His face was loose-skinned and miserable, but he was not the forbidding Charon I expected. Oh, I knew him. I *knew* him. *This* was the ferryman. "No matter. Your beloved is coming for you."

How long had I been here? I fumbled for the wool-felt purse hanging from the belt of my gown, but it was empty. No coin, no passage across the Styx. Had they buried me? My grieving family owed me two coins for my passage, at the very least, to spare me from limbo.

"What beloved?" I asked.

"Orpheus has charmed Hades himself into letting you back into the land of the living. Isn't that sweet? What a talent that boy has."

My stomach knotted again and went on diminishing until I felt there would be a raw hole visible in me. *No, no, no. Not now. I died. I'm free.* "He's coming here? Aren't I dead?"

"Oh, you're dead. But not for long."

You have a word for this sort of man, I believe, the sort who pursues a woman relentlessly even when she makes it clear that there can never be anything between them. This is the sort of man who will destroy what he cannot have.

Orpheus was coming after me.

I hadn't been dead long enough to begin worrying about what would happen when Orpheus finally died too. You see, all you who find comfort in the idea of an afterlife have never considered who you might be stuck with for all eternity. I was considering it for the first time then, staring at the lugubrious face of a man who could have been a surly uncle.

"I must get away," I said. *I had died for this.* "Orpheus will never take me."

"What are you going to do, kill yourself?" Charon shrugged and slid his oars back into the water. "You might as well wait there. I'll see you again one day, no doubt."

I was left staring into the empty mist drifting on the surface of the Styx. If I'd had a coin or two, I could have crossed and then I could have argued my case with Hades. He wanted to keep his subjects, surely? And wouldn't his sad wife Persephone plead on my behalf, knowing what it was to be a victim of men's whims, to be abducted and raped? It was my only chance. If I could defy a demigod, I could plead with Hades. So I jumped into the water. I didn't care what happened. If it swept me away, so much the better. I wanted to be swept wherever I couldn't be found.

But the water was about knee deep. I hit the riverbed hard, and scrambled upright, spitting bitter water. Another illusion—another reality that the myth had not prepared me for. Gods were liars too, then, relying on our unquestioning belief to keep us in line. I waded across the Styx, looking behind me every ten steps just as I had when I spent every waking moment and much of my dreams harried by Orpheus.

I stepped from the water and my gown wasn't wet. Where could I escape him now? I hadn't planned to die, but when I realized I had, I was comforted that death would give me respite. And underneath my hunted anxiety I felt a hard tightness for the first time, a knot of anger.

He robbed me of my peace. Now he robs me of death. And the knot grew larger.

The Underworld was crowded like a city, like Athens but without the sunshine and a sense of purpose. For a moment I wondered how I would find Hades himself, but he found me, or to be exact, Persephone appeared out of a melting crowd of shades to confront me. She was much younger, much prettier than I imagined. We all give gods faces, I suppose.

"There is no escape from Orpheus," she said. "My Lord Hades does not break his word."

"Has he promised Orpheus that he can reclaim me?"

"His music is most persuasive."

"I won't go back. I won't let him have me. You don't know how scared I am. You just don't understand."

"We are women, and gods always get what they want. How many of them were conceived in rape? Do not delude yourself." She leaned forward, all mist gray elegance and sorrow. "And never tell me again that I don't understand fear. *Never.*"

I was still more terrified of Orpheus than I was of an angry goddess. "You leave Hades for half the year."

Persephone lost her composure for a moment, fumbling with the silver silk tassels on her belt. "My mother froze the earth to force him to release me.

You have a word for this sort of man, **I believe, the sort who pursues a woman relentlessly even when she** *makes it clear that there can never be anything between them.*

"And she sent Hecate to protect you down here. So can you not help me?"

Sometimes women pity sisters in the same predicament, but there are also those who want for some reason to see others suffer their own fate. Perhaps they want to be reassured they could not have avoided their misery. Perhaps they want to share sorrow, or resent those who escape. I did not know what sort of woman Persephone had been.

"If Orpheus looks back at you when he leads you from here, he must leave you here," she said. "Until he dies, of course. That is all I can do for you." She turned and began fading back into the milling shades.

"Ask your Lord Hades how he feels to be duped by a boy with a lyre," I called. The anger that had started as a small knot was now insistent, enveloping, taking over my whole body and closing my throat, dead or not. "Ask him if he wants to be robbed of his citizens by the son of a lesser god."

Persephone paused for a moment, and she looked back at me. Perhaps she wanted me to hear her. It might have been simple surprise.

"I shall," she said.

She had given me all she could. It was up to me to use the information. I walked back to the banks of the Styx and waded across toward a gathering crowd of shades on the far bank, awaiting their

passage, coins in hand. And then I saw Orpheus, not a shade but a man among them. He was standing with his back to the river, shifting from foot to foot, agitated, impatient. For a moment, I felt the sick dread I'd known when I saw the rams heads; and then it was gone, replaced by a surge of anger, of indignation, that made my head buzz.

I was afraid of him, but I was enraged as well. I hated him. It was suddenly more than an emotion, it was the whole of me. And I knew exactly how I would make him look at me and lose me.

"Orpheus," I called. My voice jammed in my throat. "I'm sorry. Don't hurt me. Don't hurt my family. I'll come."

If he replied I didn't know. He began walking backward, awkward, glancing to the side of him, and then he must have realized there was no way of seizing me without looking back at me: he tugged at the fabric knotted round his waist as a belt and tied it round his eyes. I wondered if I should run, but Hades would no doubt have returned me to him.

And I no longer wanted to run from the object of my fear. I wanted to tear at it. I hesitated, but I did what I thought I would dread most. I reached out to touch his back, stretched hand.

"This way, Orpheus," I called. "This way." And I walked up to him. Head turned away, he grasped my hand hard and I steeled myself to relax so he would think I was coming willingly and had surrendered to him. As he led me away, he stumbled over roots and rocks, and reached up to pull the cloth from his eyes.

Blind anger is a great strength, **you see, and even a girl like me** *can fight with enough* **fury for fuel.**

He was so certain I was finally overcome by his persistence and his threats. It seemed not to have occurred to him that my dread might be equally persistent. I flung myself at him, dug my fingers into his face and grabbed his stringy yellow hair. We fell to the ground. He was far stronger than me, but I had his hair and I had my full weight and rage upon him, and all I needed was to hang on long enough to make him look at me. I could see his mouth opening and swearing and screaming. He punched me aside, but I hung on to his hair. Blind anger is a great strength, you see, and even a girl like me can fight with enough fury for fuel. And then, without conscious thought, I sank my teeth hard into his nose like an animal. The taste of salt blood shocked me and I was staring into his horrified, cheated eyes.

No is one of the easiest words to lip-read, by the way. He was mouthing that over and over until the invisible hand that jerked him away threw him back through a circle of brilliant gold light.

Then the horizon was suddenly gray again. I steadied myself and spat the blood from my mouth, feeling suddenly sick with the taste and the passing shock. But he was gone. I was one of the free dead again, and even if this was limbo, even if this was far from the Elysian Fields, I had escaped Orpheus this time, and that was heaven enough for me.

I had a while—a long while—to get to know Persephone and Hecate, neither of whom had any reason to side with men or gods. Perhaps we could become sisters, if not friends.

Hermes came with a new citizen for Hades a few days ago. Even though it had been a year since I had last seen him, the sight of Orpheus's face resurrected a blind fear, but I was ready for it. He brought the marks of his death with him. He was torn and cut. His neck looked . . odd. His lyre was clutched in one hand, by the strings.

Persephone and Hecate watched him without expression as Hermes handed him over to Charon on the far bank.

"More angry women," Hecate repeated, because I had not caught her words the first time. "He claims the women of Thrace were so offended when he rejected their sexual advances that they tore him apart and threw his head into the sea. With his precious lyre, too."

"And I hear that when he came to their village to seduce them with his music and rape them, they drowned out his sound with screaming," said Persephone. "Then they knocked his lyre aside and took a slaughtering knife to him, a warning to all men that women will only tolerate so much, even from the son of a god."

I could not take my eyes from him. When you fear a man to the point of death and then see him again as a creature stripped of power, you feel foolish. I felt guilty again, guilty and stupid and stunging with the memories, but now I didn't feel afraid at all.

But what would happen to him? Would he come after me again?

Persephone gave me a slight smile and steered me in front of her in that way she had when she didn't want me to miss a word of what was being said. "My Lord Hades hates an upstart," she said. "And he also hates to lose. Come and see where Orpheus will spend all time."

These days I spend my time with the Queen of the Underworld and the Queen of the Crossroads, my good sisters, my friends, keeping Hades in his place. No, he was not amused by a boy who used his divine talent to rob him of a citizen who was rightfully his. It took him a little time to devise a suitable punishment for an arrogant musician, but the result was inventive.

I will have to tolerate the myth that says Orpheus was reunited with his beloved Eurydice. In a way, it's true. More or less.

Orpheus sits playing his lyre in a sealed room with only Arachne the deaf weaver for company. Sometimes I stop to look, and then move on. Arachne says she doesn't know what all the fuss is about. The boy has pimples.

Orpheus, plucking at his untuned lyre to an audience of a single uncaring deaf weaver, still prefers to think he was killed because the women of Thrace couldn't take no for an answer. He's the son of a god. Women just don't appreciate undying love.

Well, he would say that. Wouldn't he?

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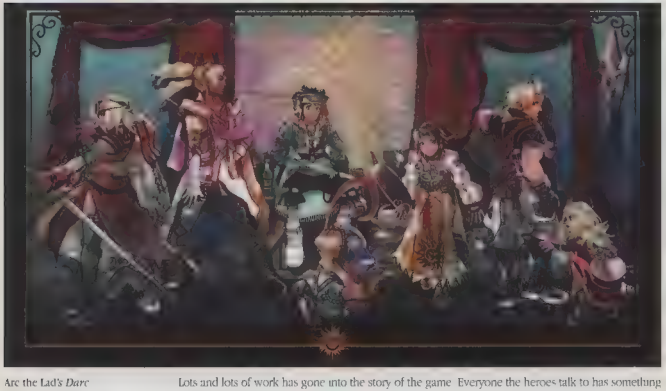
By Eric T. Baker

New RPGs add power to the *Arc the Lad, X-Men,* and *Buffy* universes.

The *Arc the Lad* series of role-playing games started on the PlayStation, and now *Twilight of the Spirits* brings the franchise to the PS2. *ATL:ToTS* tells the story of a world divided between humans and the monstrous Deimos, and abandoned by its guardian spirits, who have placed their power in several stones. Two brothers, Darc and Kharg, take it upon themselves to collect the great spirit stones and save their world from a powerful new threat. Besides the brothers, there are 14 playable characters who come in and out of the story. They each bring different abilities and attacks to the mix. For example, Kharg's best friend, Portia, has a lightweight weapon, but she has the special ability to heal other characters, a very useful skill.

The form of the game is typical of a console RPG. The player moves the characters over a 3-D map of each location. With the press of a button they interact with the other characters or the environment. The characters travel between locations on a large map, clicking on their destination. Travel on the local maps or the strategic can be interrupted by either a battle or cut scene and most often both. Combat is turn-based and similarly straightforward. The characters can move about the map, pick things up, and use items, spells, or special skills. They can also combine attacks with others in their party. The best part is that the combat is truly turn-based. There are no twitch elements; players don't have to hit a special sequence of buttons to activate any of the powers.



Arc the Lad's *Darc and Kharg and a cast of colorful and skilled characters search for the spirit stones to save their world*

Lots and lots of work has gone into the story of the game. Everyone the heroes talk to has something to add to the background or the action. Cut scenes abound, and the vast majority are done in the game's engine. This means that they are less spectacular than they might have been if done with a different animation tool. And the story has to be worked through in order. Exploring might uncover things that are going to become useful later on, but there is nothing the characters can do about them until it is time. Fans of console RPGs won't mind this. They will simply focus on *ATL:ToTS*'s strengths and love it for them.

On the subject of console RPGs, the 11th *Final Fantasy* game is out in Japan, and the 12th and 13th are on their way soon. But how many of the franchise's legions of fans were around in 1990 to play the

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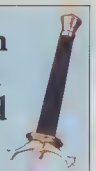

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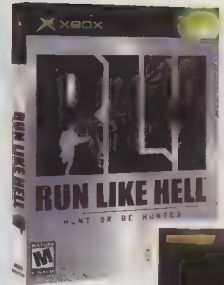
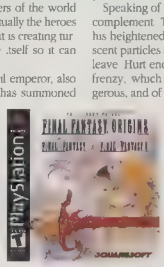


very first *FF* game on the first Nintendo machines? Even those American fans who got to play the first game didn't get to play the second, which was released only in Japan So, a decade later, Square has brought back both *Final Fantasy* and *Final Fantasy II* on one disk. called *Final Fantasy Origins*, so that gamers can get two classic games for the price of one

In the first game, the forces of order summon four young warriors, guardians of one of the world's crystals, and send them on a quest to put the world back in a harmonious balance Establishing the formula that would drive each installment of the series, the heroes set out on a voyage of discovery that introduces them and the players to odd corners of the world and amazing characters Eventually the heroes discover a powerful entity that is creating turmoil in the structure of time .itself so it can conquer the world

In the second game, an evil emperor, also bent on world domination has summoned monsters from the underworld, interrupting a very long period of peace. The monsters attack adults leaving many orphans, and it is from their ranks that the heroes of this installment come Another long quest results in the heroes building their power until they can face the evil emperor and avenge their parents



Both games look their age, although the original cut scenes have been polished up and new ones have been added Similarly, there are new opening theme songs and improved sound quality throughout. Both of these improvements are nice, but the best addition is the Memo File function that allows for quick saving of the game during play. This is even better than the new gameplay modes that let players pick the difficulty level

Even with ease, both games demonstrate the impressive story lines and worlds that are the hallmarks of the franchise

A different sort of franchise brings *X2 Wolverine's Revenge* to the PS2, Xbox, and PC The game tells once more the story of how a secret organization experimented on the mutant named Wolverine and replaced his natural skeleton with an indestructible adamantium one The game begins with the player taking the role of the post-op Wolverine and fighting his way out of the secret base. The game then flashes forward to the modern day where unknown people have implanted Wolverine with a virus that will kill him in 48 hours if the player can't guide Wolverine to the antidote. The quest leads back to the Weapon X facility, where it all began Players who love the X-Men and who have no problem learning and using combo attacks will love this game People who are not X-Men fans or who have trouble learning combos won't enjoy it as much. This is because the thing the game does best is show off the X-Men background, there are situations and characters straight from the comic including Sabretooth, Wendigo, Juggernaut, and Magneto To lend Logan a hand, both Professor X (voiced by Patrick Stewart) and Beast appear. These characters act, talk, and display powers like those in the books

Speaking of powers, Wolverine has his full complement The pull of a trigger activates his heightened senses so the player can see scent particles and footsteps by the heat they leave Hurt enough, Wolverine can go into a frenzy, which makes him even more dangerous, and of course, he has his healing factor and his claws, although oddly he is not allowed to use both at the same time The claws must be retracted for him to heal, which leads to many fights against lesser opponents being fought with simple fists

The best part of the game is the four levels of strike attacks, which are actually combination attacks The first level can be triggered by a simple button push once the target is stunned After that they get harder, but also cooler The worst part of the game is that players can't save in the middle of a level. Still, for players who love Wolverine and the havoc he

can create, this is a game they can sink their claws into.

RLH, or *Run Like Hell*, is a game with some great voice acting. Lance Henriksen from *Aliens* and *Millennium* voices Nick Conner, the hero. Clancy Brown of *Starship Troopers* and the original *Highlander* movie plays Nick's alien friend, Dag'rek. Kate Mulgrew of *Voyager* and *Remo Williams* plays a doctor on board the space mining station *Forsetti*, the setting for the game. The actors have a lot to do as *RLH* is chock a-block with cut scenes. It is a story-intensive shooter.

The story is of Nick, a military hero who is on the *Forsetti* because the war is over and he needs to be somewhere. Besides Dag'rek, he has other friends on board, but the best thing for him is that his fiancee is also on the station. Everything is going as well as can be expected until Nick returns from a routine mission to find that the station has been overrun by an alien species. The game then becomes a matter of rescuing his friends and finding his fiancée.

The running of the title comes in because one of the three alien types is tough. The first two are dangerous, but manageable, because they tend to attack one at a time. The third type, however, is immune to the guns that Nick has at his disposal. Sometimes they can be killed by tricking and trapping them, but

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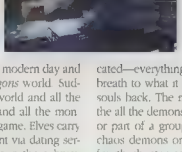
even this involves running to lead them into the surprise. For these chases the game uses a sort of mini-game where the player controls Nick's side-to-side movement and his jumping and ducking while the computer keeps him moving.

The disappointing part of the game is the lack of multiple villains. There is a decent variety of boss fights, but getting to them involves killing the same aliens over and over. The best part of the game is the voice acting and the plot. The designers sought to create a horror story in space and they succeeded.

Any list of best game backgrounds would have to include *Shadowrun*, a fusion of cyberpunk and fantasy where Elven hackers and Orc mobsters share the streets and sewers with mages and monsters. Wizards of the Coast's new *Urban Arcana Campaign Setting* for their *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* is similar, but it is set in the modern day instead of the future, and it brings even more magic and monsters to the table.

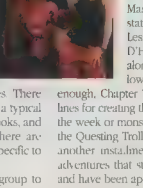


The mechanics of the background is that the Shadow, the barrier that separates the many worlds has grown thin between our modern day and a typical *Dungeons & Dragons* world. Suddenly magic works in our world and all the spells in the magic books and all the monsters in the manuals are fair game. Elves carry machine guns, vampires hunt via dating services, and dragons put lairs in the subway tunnels. The game has all the fun of *D&D* with all the convenience of the modern day.

The 320-page, hardbound, full color book includes new races (such as snake-blooded humans), new advanced classes (technomage, etc.) new prestige classes (holy and unholy knights and more), new feats, new creatures (living dumpsters anyone?), new spells (Electromagnetic Pulse among many others), and lots of organizations and secret societies. There are write-ups of various locations in a typical city (with maps), many adventure books, and the bones of seven adventures. There are even 20 pages of new magic items specific to the modern world.

The writers intend each playing group to personalize *UA* to their tastes. How many monsters and how deeply entrenched they are is one of the things to be decided, but the conceit that is meant to run through all campaigns is that most people don't notice that the magic has happened. They don't see the monsters, or if they do, the incident changes in their memory to something mundane. This necessarily limits the effects that the shadow visitors can have on the world. A DM could change things enough so that a dragon could run for president, but it would take much more work than just running the default world.

The latest addition to the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer RPG* line of books is *Monster Smackdown*, a hardbound, 170-page book that is identified by having the word "Evil" emblazed on the cover in big, friendly red letters. *MS* details the vampires, demons, big bads, and all the other monsters that have appeared on the TV show. It provides pictures, statistics, and adventure ideas for each of the threats. The big bads get their own full-blown character sheets.



After the introduction the first section is dedicated to the care, feeding and destruction of vampires. All the implications of the curse the show dealt with in its seven seasons are mentioned and explicated—everything from a vampire's lack of breath to what it means when they get their souls back. The next section is a bestiary of the all the demons that served as background or part of a group in the series such as the chaos demons or the Order of Taraka. The fourth chapter covers all the monsters that weren't demons or big bads: ghosts, robots, werewolves, etc. Ethan Rayne and Gwendolyn Post, two of the series' best villains, are in this section.

The cream of the crop, however, is in Chapter 5, "Bads, Big and Small." Angelus, Spike, the Master, and the Mayor are all statted up and ready to go. Lesser sights like Adam and D'Hoffryn are here as well, along with evil Xander and Willow. In case all those bads aren't enough, Chapter 7 contains rules and guidelines for creating the players' own monsters of the week or monster-based characters such as the Questing Troll Hero. The book ends with another installment of the series of linked adventures that started in the core rulebook and have been appearing in each one since.

All along the *Buffy RPG* has given enough to make a campaign go. Now game masters have enough villains to make it fly. ❧

books

Continued from page 46

Siegel's saga of Fern Capel, a young witch whose adventures have been the subject of two previous fantasies. In *Prospero's Children*, Fern was sixteen, newly discovering her powers and the dangers and responsibilities that went with them. The exuberantly atmospheric prose and lavishly imaginative plot—which pulled from an impressive array of myths and legends—marked Siegel as a strong and original talent. In *The Dragon Charmer*, an older Fern, scarred by her experiences in the first book, underwent a riveting process of death and rebirth among the tangled roots of the World Tree. Darker and weirder than its predecessor, once again distinguished by a mastery of mythic sources and a style of bravura sensuality that, at its best, approached the intensity of Elizabeth Hand's work, the novel depicted Fern's path to a hard-won maturity with an emotional honesty that neither sugar-coated her tragedies nor belittled her triumphs. The grown-up Fern who emerged from these books was a survivor: a young witch as ruthless as she needed to be, and as compassionate as she could be.

The Witch Queen features the return of the witch Morgus, who held Fern captive in *The Dragon Charmer*. Also returning is Azmordis, an immortal incarnation of evil that has attached itself like a parasite to humanity. Azmordis seeks Fern's soul and magic for his own dark purposes. Morgus's plans for Fern are simpler: she just wants her dead.

Siegel's writing is as gorgeous and impassioned as ever, but as the novel progresses, Fern begins to wilt. Who can blame her? First, there's the shock of finding herself stalked by an invulnerable Morgus. Then there's the accumulated psychic toll that magic takes on witches, the most powerful of whom almost inevitably go mad. Let's not forget the dangers to which her brother, Will, and her best friend, Gaynor, are routinely exposed just because of her existence. Not to mention Luc, a handsome man with a dark secret who may just be the reincarnation of her long-dead Atlantean lover. Oh, and vivid nightmares in which she signs her soul over to Azmordis . . . which may not be nightmares at all.

It's not that Fern doesn't face up to these challenges with courage and pluck. She does. But win or lose, the damage keeps piling up, emotional and physical, until at last . . . Well, I won't spoil Siegel's surprise. But I will confess that I was mystified by it. And disappointed. And angered. Because it felt *wrong*. It felt unworthy of what had gone before, not just in this book, but its two predecessors. It diminished them, diminished Fern.

Unless, that is, contrary to the jacket copy (which, as we all know, is invariably true), *The Witch Queen* is *not* the end of the series. One can always hope . . . ❧

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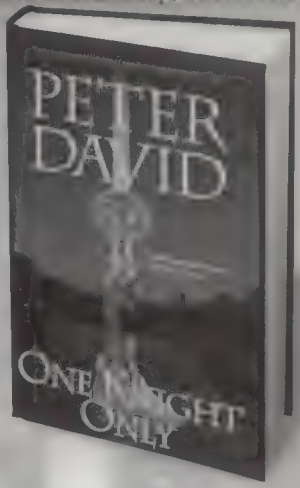

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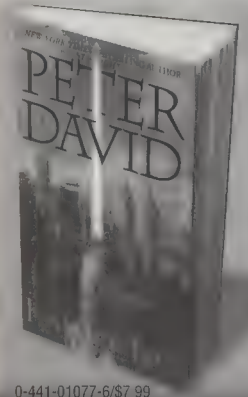

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Continued from page 99

hopefully without excessive control on either side. This is the sense of dreaming a drawing and not the other way around."

In 1980s Jones left The Studio and full-time illustration behind for personal and commissioned work. On occasion he would dip his brush back into illustration, as, for example, in *The Book of Kane* by Karl Edward Wagner (1985). But the image was beginning to seem beside the point—Jones was moving deeper into the mysteries of color, texture, pattern, and mood.

In fact, Jones has become a sort of anti-illustrator, not even bothering to give titles to recent work unless forced to do so. He continues to revisit certain iconographic themes, for example, in *At the Earth's Core* and other related personal work. Perhaps his shamanistic beliefs resonate to these primeval scenes.

"In a number of hardcover books that I illustrated I tried never to make a picture of what the author wrote. It would either be a picture of a character or it would be an atmospheric picture of a place with the character in it. The figure was usually doing something that was ambiguous enough where the readers were never robbed of their imagination. I purposely did that because I didn't want to tell anybody what it looked like. I didn't want any of my ideas to replace the imagination of either the author or the reader."

Even in early work like the cover to *Swords Against Death* by Fritz Leiber (1968) Jones pays as much attention to the nonfigurative aspects of the work as to the subject itself. The boat's sail is merely an excuse to play with tonality and color complements, as is the sky and sea. It's easy to see how the artist who painted this work went on to create the magnificent cover for *A Game of Thrones* by George R.R. Martin (2000). The use of color is far subtler in the later work, the paint handling looser—Jones isn't afraid to show the mark of the brush—but the dreamy atmospheric effects resonate between the two paintings.

His recent painting has left behind the easy and alluring color complements and strict representation as it has moved into ever more painterly and mysterious realms. Mood is emphasized above color, above detail, above all.

Jeffrey Jones has traveled far. No one would blame him if he decided to stop and rest upon his achievements. But he keeps moving. His artistic journey consumes him, the road is long, and the end is nowhere in sight. ❧

Thanks to Cathy & Arnie Fenner for assistance with this article. All quotes unless otherwise noted appear in *The Art of Jeffrey Jones*, edited by Cathy Fenner & Arnie Fenner (Underwood Books, 2002)

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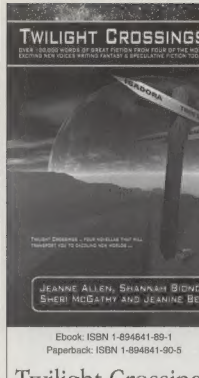
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pietro coppino

Continued from page 82

So the next morning Cesare, weary of travel, hired a driver to carry Pietro home to Sugremaro.

The day was a long one for the old sculptor. As the carriage sped along, he relived his conversation with the mountain, trying to sort what he had actually said from what he had meant to say, and what he had only wished to say. The memory of it was like a dream, flowing into distorted shapes he could neither repair nor alter in any way. He had shown bravery and integrity on the mountainside, of that much he was certain. He had treated honestly and forthrightly with Cimone, and if the mountain had any honor it would surely recognize the justness of Pietro's complaint and restore Persephone to him.

It was sunset when the carriage clattered to a stop before the house in Sugremaro. Two full days had passed since his audience with the mountain. Pietro took the front steps as quickly as his knees would allow, not even pausing to retrieve his bag from the carriage. He fumbled with the key, pushed open the door, and hurried to the studio. His motions felt too slow, his footsteps leaden with dread.

Inside it was dark, but even before he found the cords to the blinds he could see that things were not well. As the red light of evening stung his eyes, he stifled a cry. Persephone was no more than a shapeless mass flowing over the prison of Pluto's arms. She had fallen in on herself as a candle when it melts; thick rivulets of marble had run down the pedestal to stream between the flagstones. Nothing was left to indicate what a beautiful piece of sculpture she once had been, save a few indentations that might be construed as a face. Only Pluto remained intact, his powerful arms grappling with liquid stone.

"No!" cried the old sculptor, falling to his knees. "No!"

The rivulets of marble were coursing still. Pietro scrabbled at them with his fingers, but they flowed through his hands like cold, solid cream. The snow-white mass atop the pedestal trembled and shrank. Pietro broke his fingernails trying to prevent it from vanishing under the flagstones.

He jumped to his feet and tore at his hair as the last traces of Persephone disappeared. Now Pluto's outstretched arms grasped only empty air. Those arms seemed to reach for him, beckoning.

Pietro Coppino sank to the floor, shrinking from that deathly embrace, and covered his face with his forearms. His body shook like restless earth, while beneath him the flagstones shuddered. Outside his window orioles shrieked, the horses whinnied in the street, and the mountains rose to blot out the last thin crescent of sun. ❧

runesmith

Continued from page 89

The pattern was random; his talent and his skills understood it.

He murmured a new murmur.

Hunkered down on his haunches, he called up the power.

There was the faintest hiss of a breeze in the tumbled warren of this focus-room, a breeze that was peculiarly bittersweet, the way Holland chocolates used to be. A chill breeze that broke sweat out on Smith's spine, in the hollows between his shoulder blades.

Then the screams began.

They were screams beyond sound, and surely only an immeasurable fraction of them reached Smith, so different were they in quality and kind from anything remotely human. Yet their echoes and their backlash seemed to blur the world for a moment of horror beyond imagining. A soundless, motionless quake, the terror of countless billions of frightful beings facing death and (unlike the millions who had perished here) knowing it, knowing why.

Smith's skills knew as Smith himself could not, that the universe itself was relieved of a plague.

Was it a long time later? Probably it was—Smith was never able to remember that—when he stood up and filled his lungs with the dusty, sweet air and looked out on tomorrow and forever with clear and guiltless eyes.

He tested his power. It was intact.

He walked to the inner and outer barriers, kicking them down. He looked out at the sunlit ruins of the city.

If I live, he thought (and barring accident I can live forever), I can build it up again. I have magic; they gave it to me and no one can take it away. Magic and science, humanity and the Powers. It's supposed to have worked that way long ago. It will again. Build it up again ...

And if I don't, if I fail, then at least I've fixed it so they have no enemies but themselves. Terrible as that might be, there are worse things.

He saw a flicker of movement in the distance, something feeble, hungry, misshapen, ragged.

The runesmith stepped out of the shadows and walked toward the movement in the distance. There was sun now. For the first time. Because he wanted sun. And he wanted cool breezes. And the scent of good things in the air.

He could have it all now. They might never forgive him, but they could not harm him, and he would help them, as they had never been able to help themselves.

They were still alone, but perhaps it would be better now.❧

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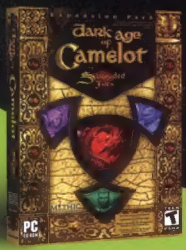

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